



FINAL DESTINATION

NEW LINE CINEMA



A NOVEL BY NANCY A COLLINS

LOOKS COULD KILL

BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM THE MOTION PICTURE
'FINAL DESTINATION' CREATED BY JEFFREY REDDICK

ONE

The receptionist, who was sitting behind the front desk of Pier Merlot, barely glanced up from her computer screen as one of the most beautiful women on the face of the planet exited the elevator and hurried into the agency's richly appointed foyer. Then again, the coming and going of the most beautiful people on earth was a daily occurrence there.

"She's waiting for you," was all that the receptionist said in way of acknowledgement of the other woman's arrival.

Sherry nodded her tawny-haired head in understanding. She tightened her grip on the Gucci garment bag, which was draped over one lithe shoulder, as she breezed past the front desk with the same long-legged, purposeful stride that had propelled her to rave reviews on the Paris catwalks. She pushed open the frosted glass double doors that led into the belly of one of New York City's most prestigious modeling agencies, and headed straight to the only office, out of the dozens filling the entire fortieth floor, that really mattered.

Merlot was sitting behind her desk, as always, a lit cigarette fitted into her trademark ebony holder, as she went over stacks of proofs with a jeweler's loop. Her boy-toy-in-residence of the moment, Carlo, was also on hand, lounging near the well-stocked wet bar.

Merlot had once been a model herself, in the days before Twiggy. In her early sixties, she was still an amazing beauty, thanks to good bone structure and decades of carefully applied plastic surgery. It also helped that the five-foot nine former model still maintained her fighting weight of one hundred and ten pounds, despite not having set foot in front of a camera in a professional capacity since 1975.

But perhaps Merlot's most impressive attribute was the self-confidence that she carried about her like a Derringer tucked away in her evening bag. Whether swanning about with European royalty in the gaming houses of Monte Carlo, or whooping it up with wild-eyed beatniks in the Village, she had always managed to maintain a sense of sophisticated style that was beyond reproach. Merlot could remain

elegantly dressed in waders whilst tied to a tree during the middle of a hurricane.

The former model looked up from her work as the younger woman entered the room. "Sherry, my precious. Finally. I was wondering when you would get here."

"I'm sorry, Merlot," Sherry said, leaning down to air-kiss her agent's proffered cheek. "There was a delay at Orly. I only just arrived at Kennedy. I had the limo driver take me straight here. I haven't even been home yet."

"Darling, the phones have been ringing off the hook. Your catwalk debut at Haute Couture has been the talk of the trade! You would not *believe* the photographers who want to book you. I have *Vogue Italia*, *Elle* and *Marie Claire* all clamoring to use you for their upcoming editorials. By this time next year, my dear, you'll have Prada, Gucci and Estée Lauder all eating from that lovely little palm of yours. Mark my words."

"That is very good news for the signora, yes?" Carlo said, beaming a hundred-watt smile in Sherry's direction.

"Less talky-talky and more drinky-drinky, if you please, darling," Merlot said curtly.

Carlo's smile quickly folded in on itself, and he bowed his head as he moved over to the wet bar and began fixing his mistress a highball.

"Now that I have you back on terra firma, such as it is," Merlot said, scrawling a street address on a piece of paper. "I need you to go to this shoot. The entire Cellar is being featured in *Harper's Bazaar*."

Sherry scowled at the paper. "Today? But I just flew in from Paris."

"The editor asked for *you* for the cover, dear heart," Merlot said with a shrug. "But I understand if you're too tired. I explained that you were in transit, so she said she would take Rose as a substitute."

"I'll go," Sherry stuffed the address into the hip pocket of her Calvins. "Who's the photographer?"

"That's my little soldier," Merlot said with a sly smile. "And Gunter's doing the shooting."

Sherry groaned, rolling her eyes. "It keeps getting better."

Merlot gave a small laugh. "Once you get to know him, Gunter's an absolute pussy cat. Although I don't know if I should be mad at him or not for knocking up one of my best girls. Now, shoo! I'll call ahead and let hair and make-up know you're on the way!"

As she left the skyscraper that housed the modeling agency and climbed into the back of the waiting limo, Sherry handed the paper with the shoot's address to the driver. As the car pulled away from the curb, she sighed and allowed herself to slump against the seat.

At nineteen years of age, Sherry could not remember a time when she was not shuttling between one shoot and another. The last five years of her life were little more than a blur of cab rides to and from airports or local shoots. It didn't matter if the location was Aruba, Paris, Milan, or Brooklyn, the streets all looked the same after a while. Jet lag and persistent hunger were her constant companions—along with the little vial of white powder she used to perk herself up and dull her appetite.

She reached inside her Vuitton handbag the moment the thought crossed her mind and dipped her finger into the cocaine. The ride was too short and too bumpy to snort, so she had to be satisfied with rubbing it directly onto her gums. She grimaced at the taste and glanced up to see the driver watching her in the rear-view mirror. She met his eyes for a moment and he quickly averted his gaze. As far as she was concerned, doing drugs in front of a limo driver was about as embarrassing as having sex in front of a house cat.

There was a time, back before Merlot's scouts discovered her when she was modeling swimsuits at the local mall's summer fashion preview, out in the wilds of Eastern Pennsylvania, when that would not have been the case. That was back when she still was called by the name her parents had given her, not the one Merlot had chosen for her. But it was not before she sued for the right to be an emancipated minor, in order to move to New York to pursue her career full-time.

In many ways, it was like the fifteen years she had spent growing up in Allentown had never happened. As far as she was concerned, she had only been truly alive since she stepped off the train onto the platform at Grand Central four years ago.

The shoot was in a former industrial warehouse along the East River, which had been converted into trendy loft space. One side of the huge open area was full of lighting and camera gear, with rolls of backdrop suspended from the ceiling. Make-up and wardrobe stations filled the other side. The moment Sherry entered the building she could hear the telltale sound of handheld blow dryers that signaled an active fashion shoot.

Justinian, Sherry's regular make-up artist, scurried forward the moment he caught sight of her. "There you are. Thank God you're finally here. I thought I was going to have to end up working on Rose. And you know I simply can *not* stand that bitch."

"I'm sure you say that to all the girls," Sherry said with a small laugh.

"Well, you're right about that, sugar," Justinian giggled. "But this time it happens to be the truth. Now, let's get you in the chair."

"Sherry."

She turned in the direction of the voice and was greeted with a hug by a radiantly beautiful woman with chestnut-colored, shoulder-length hair, dressed in a pair of black velvet maternity pants, and a loose-fitting black and white bamboo print Chloe halter blouse. Although the figure was nowhere near the same, the face was still that of *Seventeen's* Cover Girl of the Year for 1997, and Sherry's best friend and fellow top model, Cabernet.

"Cabby! Merlot said you'd be here. Let me look at you." She held her friend at arm's length, her gaze automatically dropping to the other model's gently swelling midsection. "You look magnificent."

"I feel like a puke factory," the older girl said with a laugh. "Not that throwing up after every meal is anything new, right? But this time I'm doing it whether I intend to or not. We'll catch up after the shoot, okay? I have to run to wardrobe. I'm modeling the new Lagerfeld maternity line. But I want to hear *all* about Paris."

The moment Sherry took her seat at the makeup station, a tall, statuesque redhead, with eyes the color of emeralds and skin like a Dresden doll, plopped down in the chair beside her.

"Have you seen how fat Cabby's become?" the redhead said, by way of greeting.

"She's not *fat*, Rose," Sherry said with a sigh. "She's pregnant. There's a difference."

Chardonnay, a leggy blonde with short-cropped hair, sitting opposite to Sherry, leaned over and rested her hand atop her arm. "I think it's wonderful that Cabby's decided to take time off to focus on raising her child."

"Yes. How wonderful for her," Rose sniffed. "I'm sure she'll get plenty of work from Lane Bryant once she's ready to come back."

"At least she's undergoing a *natural* transformation." This came from Chardonnay, the platinum blonde.

"What are you suggesting?" Rose snapped, turning to glower at the eighteen year-old model.

"Nothing," Chardonnay said with a shrug of her perfectly rounded shoulders. "But if Michael Jackson's nose fits, wear it."

Rose's cheeks developed twin blotches of an unbecoming red, and the young model jumped to her feet and stormed off.

"I'd say 'me-yow', but you're much too bitchy to be catty." Justinian said with a laugh.

"She can dish it out, but she can't take it," Shiraz snorted as her own make-up artist put the finishing touches on her mocha-colored flesh. "You can't be thin-skinned in this business, no matter how flawless it might be."

"Rose is just pissed that you made the shoot," Chablis said with a dry laugh. "She was bragging about getting the cover because you had fucked up and missed your flight."

Chardonnay leaned forward and dropped her voice to a whisper. She put her hand atop Sherry's once more as she spoke, but this time the touch lingered longer than before. "That's not the *only* thing she was trying to steal from you while you were gone."

"What do you mean, Chard?"

"Just that the dog will play while the cat's away."

Before Sherry could ask her friend any further questions, the other model quickly removed her hand and turned her face away from her. Sherry felt a familiar hand rest on her shoulder.

"Hey, babe. I missed you." Brut, Pier Merlot's star male model, leaned in and kissed the air besides Sherry's cheek with his trademark bee-stung lips.

"Is *that* why you didn't call me the whole time I was in Paris?" she replied.

If her tone concerned Brut, it could not be seen in his sparkling blue eyes.

"I tried calling you on your cell, but I couldn't get through," Brut said with a toss of his surfer boy locks. "And the one time I called the hotel, they said you were out at some shoot with a photographer from *Paris Match*."

Sherry studied his smiling, boyish features for a long moment, but was not up to the task of trying to divine the truth. It all sounded plausible enough to be true and that was good enough for the moment. She was too tired to do anything more than focus on the job at hand.

Justinian was putting the final touches on her make-up when there was sudden buzz of activity and Merlot suddenly appeared in Sherry's mirror.

"Good afternoon, my lovelies. As always, it is a delight to see you all. And that goes doubly for you too, my dear," Merlot said, smiling affectionately at Cabernet. The older woman patted the model's swollen belly. "I'm glad to see our little mother is positively glowing. I'm already pitching your bundle of joy for Baby Dior, by the way."

"You'll do no such thing to my child—unless I'm the one doing the shoot."

This comment came from one of the photographers, who had stopped taking pictures and come over to see what was going on. Merlot rarely left the office to visit locations, unless they involved balmy skies and sandy beaches.

"What is it? I'm very busy here."

"I see impending fatherhood has done nothing to mellow your temperament, Gunter."

"Californians are mellow," the German replied with a snort of disgust. "I am not American, much less a verdant Californian."

"Well, if you must know, I have news so wonderful I had to come right over and tell you all about it. I just got off the phone with Roma Fragrance in Italy. They're launching a new, youth-oriented perfume line next year, called Fellini, and they want to use all of you in the upcoming campaign. But most importantly, they especially want you, Sherry, as their lead spokesmodel."

Sherry's jaw dropped, despite her best attempt to look nonchalant. "Oh-my-God."

"I'm so happy for you!" Cabernet squealed, throwing her arms around her friend and hugging her as tightly as her condition allowed.

"Let me continue, please," Merlot said above the sudden swell of excited chatter from the gathered models. "To celebrate, I've decided to host a party! How does a Caribbean cruise sound?"

Chardonnay, Chablis, Shiraz, Cabernet, Sherry and Rose responded by clasping hands and hopping up and down, squealing like a squadron of cheerleaders who have just been informed they were going to State.

Merlot pulled Sherry aside and smiled as she brushed a stray lock of brownish-blond hair from the young girl's flawless brow. "This is just the start, my dear. You have a wondrous life ahead of you. And while your face may not as yet launched a thousand ships, it will at least have an ocean liner to its credit."

TWO

"That's it?" Sherry asked uncertainly, as she peered out of the back of the taxi. She was still wearing the clothes she had on from New York: a two-tone, pink and red, block print cardigan over a gray tank, with a rosy-toned, floral print, A-line skirt with diagonal stripes at the hem—all from Marc Jacobs—along with a pink jade bracelet from Valentino.

"You say Pier Thirteen, Miami harbor. I take you Pier Thirteen," the driver said in heavily accented English, speaking over the Latin music pouring from his stereo.

"That's the address Merlot gave us," Brut replied, studying the engraved invitation in the shape of a dolphin, which he and over one hundred other guests had been issued with.

"I was just expecting something bigger, you know?" Sherry said with a sigh.

Compared to the massive cruise ships anchored alongside the other docks, the *Coral Clipper*, with its four decks, dining room, onboard casino and seventy-five staterooms, seemed as small as the cigarette boat she could see buzzing back and forth across the harbor.

"Granted, she's not the *Queen Mary*, but we're only going on an overnight cruise to Key West and back," Brut shrugged. He was dressed in a pair of faded gray Polo jeans, a pale blue Calvin Klein shirt, a navy blue silk Dolce & Gabbana blazer, which was already proving far too warm for Florida, and a platinum Panerai wristwatch.

As Sherry looked back out the window in the direction of the cruise ship, she saw another taxi pull up behind them. "This is definitely the place. Cabby and Gunter just arrived."

Sherry hopped out of the cab and hurried to greet her friend, leaving Brut to pay the driver.

"Cabby, Gunter. I'm so glad you decided to make it."

"Well, being seasick can't be any worse than what I'm already going through each morning," Cabernet said with a tight smile as her lover helped her out of the taxi.

Although she was just beginning to show, she was wearing a royal purple Dosa slip with an embroidered floral hem over a pair of Citizens of Humanity denim maternity jeans, and a pair of Marc Jacobs flats. "Besides, once the baby comes, we're not going to have the time for little pleasure jaunts like we used to."

"Ja. Better network now while we still can," Gunter said with a wry half-smile.

Sherry wasn't terribly sure if she was meant to laugh or not. Gunter was prone to making statements that did not involve the world of high fashion or the business of modeling, and therefore usually confused or bored her. She did not particularly like the photographer, despite his obvious talent with a camera lens. His disdain for the industry that provided his living was notorious, as typified by the way he had chosen to dress down for the occasion in a pair of frayed black DKNY jeans, a charcoal-gray Hanes T-shirt, and a pair of black and white Converse sneakers. His only concession to fashion appeared to be the pair of Roberto Cavalli sunglasses he was wearing, but because he was her best friend's lover she tolerated his constant presence as best she could.

Cabernet solved Sherry's problem by giving a small laugh and pecking Gunter on his chin, which somehow always managed to stay stubbly, without ever seeming to produce a genuine beard.

"Oh, you. You're incorrigible."

Sherry gave an appropriately light giggle and threaded her arm around Brut's elbow. "You know my boyfriend, don't you, Gunter?"

"Of course." The photographer's eyes swept over the male model with the detached air of an entomologist attempting to recall the exact name of a species of bug. "Brut, is it? I shot you for Calvin. Underwear, war es nicht?"

"Yeah. The billboard on Times Square."

"Of course." Gunter nodded, already dismissing the other man. "Come along, my dear," he said, patting Cabernet's hand. "We don't want to be late and have the party leave without us. Merlot said they would be setting sail at exactly four in the afternoon."

As the four of them headed down the pier, they were greeted by the sound of a live band, along with the noise generated by dozens of

voices raised in conversation. Although the ship had yet to leave the pier, it was clear the party was already well under way.

The ship's hospitality officer and his underlings, outfitted in crisp dress whites, stood alongside the gangway leading to the main deck, checking the invitations against a passenger manifest.

"Gunter was only half joking," Cabernet said over her shoulder to Sherry as they waited to be vetted against the guest list. "Everyone who is anyone in the fashion business will be on this ship—if they can make it. And if they can't, they'll send their right hands. I've already seen top execs from Versace, Oscar de la Renta, Gucci and *Condé Nast* bopping around on the top deck."

"Oh, really?" As much as she wanted to project the appearance of jaded indifference, Sherry had to admit that she was excited by the prospect of spending twenty-four hours rubbing elbows with some of the most influential names in the fashion industry.

"Oh, look. There's Shiraz." Cabernet waved, trying to catch her fellow model's attention. "Shiraz, down here!"

The African-American model leaned over the railing and shouted at the top of her lungs in order to be heard over the amplified music. "Hey, girlfriends. Get on up here. This party's off the hook. Come find me when you get on board—I'll be with the band. I know the bass player."

"Doesn't she always?" Sherry stage-whispered.

"Now, Sherry," Cabernet said in mock-admonishment. "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say it at all."

"If that was the case, mien Liebling," Gunter chuckled, "then practically everyone you know would be a mute. Myself included."

"There you go, ma'am," the hospitality officer said with a smile as professional and as artificial as any Sherry could plaster onto her face. "Welcome aboard the *Coral Clipper*. You're very lucky to have caught us when you did. We were just about to cast off."

As Sherry ascended the gangway, her attention was snagged momentarily by the sound of powerful engines. She glanced in the direction of the sound, but was blinded by the late afternoon sun. She raised a hand to shield her eyes from the glare and saw the

cigarette boat she'd spotted earlier had moved closer in, sending up a rooster tail of salt sea spray in its wake.

The crewman, who was stationed on the main deck gangway to greet and orientate the guests, saw her looking at the powerboat. "These weekend boaters think they own the waterways," he said shaking his head. "Once we clear the harbor it should be smooth sailing all the way down to Key West."

"Could you tell me where I might find Ms Merlot?"

"Yes, ma'am," the crewman replied. "Madame is on the sun deck. That's the top deck, near the bridge. Take the starboard gangway off the main deck."

Sherry gave the sailor a blank stare and did not budge.

"That would be the right staircase, ma'am."

"Oh, of course." Sherry turned to look at her friends. "Cabby? Brut? Coming with?"

Cabernet shook her head. "I'd rather find my cabin and get situated first," she said. "In my condition it pays to know where the nearest toilet is."

"Head, ma'am," the crewman interjected politely. "On board a ship it's called a head."

"How apropos," Gunter said with a crooked smile. "Given the guest list."

"Whatever," Sherry sighed. She could tell by the way Cabernet giggled and the look on the sailor's face that Gunter's comment was supposed to be funny, but she wasn't feeling up to pretending she appreciated his sense of humor. "How about you, Brut?"

"Yeah, I'll go with you."

As Sherry and Brut headed up the stairs leading to the upper decks, passing both guest and crew, they bumped into Chablis, who was dressed in a very low cut, cotton cappuccino-colored Marni cardigan that exposed her midriff; a sequined, leaf-print Bernado skirt and a pink coral Simon Alcantara necklace that dangled all the way to her belly button. She was in the company of a rangy, dark-haired man with a high-speed camera slung about his neck—no doubt yet another of her f-stop conquests. In all the years Sherry had known Chablis, she had yet to pay money for a portfolio.

"There you are," Chablis said, pecking at the air alongside Sherry's left cheek. "Merlot was asking for you."

"Is she still on the top deck?"

"Yes, we just left her. We're going to take a few shots to commemorate the event, aren't we, baby?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Right." Chablis's conquest of the moment was staring avidly at Sherry; studying her with the mixture of lust, fascination and clinical detachment common to every photographer she had ever met, regardless of their sexual orientation.

"Come along," Chablis snapped, grabbing her companion by the elbow and dragging him behind her down the promenade deck. "We're wasting perfectly good daylight."

"She's going to eat him up and spit him out," Sherry said, shaking her head as she watched the couple disappear around a bulkhead.

"Yeah, but he'll be loving every minute of it."

"I thought I heard your voice." Chardonnay stuck her head out of the door to the forward saloon. She was wearing a brightly colored, silk ikat, Oscar de la Renta trench coat that hung open to reveal the Moschino black and white tropical print brasserie underneath, and a pair of white, super wide-leg, Jil Sanders pants. "Come on inside—the party's just getting started." Her high-beam smile abruptly dimmed as she caught sight of Sherry's boyfriend. "Hey, Brut."

"Hey, Chard. You, uh, you got something there." He pointed to his upper lip.

Chardonnay blushed and quickly touched her own upper lip, wiping away the telltale trace of white powder under her right nostril.

"Thanks. You two going to join me?"

"We'll be back down after I talk to Merlot," Sherry promised.

"Promise?" Chardonnay asked, running her lower lip out in a little girl pout.

"Promise!" Sherry laughed in return.

Brut shook his head and laughed as they resumed their climb up the gangway. "She is so horny for you."

"Jealous?"

"Hell, no! I'd be all for it, if I didn't already know she doesn't like to share."

"You're such a dog."

"And I'll stay one until the day I die."

Coral Clipper's uppermost deck, known as the sun deck, housed the ship's bridge and the captain's quarters in the fore section, five luxury suites amidships and a large, open observation deck lined with chaises longues and deck chairs toward the aft. High ranking fashion industry executives stood gathered in clumps of three or more, chattering amongst themselves between sips from the cocktail glasses they snatched from the passing waiters. As Sherry passed by they all made a point to stop what they were doing to bid her hello. She tried not to let her delight in their attention show in her eyes as she breezed past.

Merlot was standing at the railing, dressed in a formal-length black and white print Chanel dress with a satin belt and bows at the décolletage, with diamond Tiffany earrings and jeweled Oscar de la Renta slides. She was facing the rear of the ship, calmly puffing away on her ubiquitous cigarette holder. She was looking at the deck below, where the majority of the party guests were gathered.

"Hi, Merlot—"

"Hush." The older woman held up a hand that glittered with jeweled Veruda rings.

Sherry had come to know that tone of voice all too well over the years. It meant Merlot was busy judging someone. It could be over the choice of shoes, the color of nail polish, or the way they used their cocktail fork. But once her decisions concerning someone's style were made, it was as final as Solomon's.

"I'm watching your little friend, Rose," Merlot said, the words coming out as slow and deceptively soft as a velvet python. She pointed toward the buffet table below. "See? There she is."

Sherry could easily spot Rose's trademark red hair amongst the throngs of blondes and brunettes. The young model was standing in front of the heavily laden buffet table, wearing a formfitting, floral print, silk chiffon, J Mendel dress and coral pink Louis Vuitton pumps and was nervously eyeing the spread provided for the guests.

There was a tower of peeled cocktail shrimp, wheels of gouda and brie, as well as French pastries bursting with whipped cream, and a carving station where a smiling man dressed in chef's whites sliced off chunks of prime rib and pork loin. Although she was trying her best to look nonchalant, the redheaded model moved back and forth before the buffet like a captive lioness pacing off the confines of its cage.

Rose came to an abrupt stop and picked up a plate. Merlot leaned forward, keen to catch the younger woman's slightest moment. Although she could not see them behind her sunglasses, Sherry knew that the former model's eyes had narrowed into gun slits. Rose turned the salad plate in her hand around and around, like it was the wheel to a bumper-car, then, after a moment's hesitation, returned it to the stack from which it came.

"Very good," Merlot said with a pleased sigh, allowing her shoulders to relax. "She is learning the rules. You remember them, don't you, my dear?"

Sherry nodded and answered without thinking. "Food is the enemy. Never eat in public."

"That's right, my dear. Of course, drinking is altogether different." Merlot held out her empty Martini glass to Carlo, who stood off to one side, watching her with an attentiveness that bordered on jittery. "Another drinky-drinky."

"Si, signora."

"Isn't it just marvelous, my darlings?" Merlot asked, gesturing to the merrymaking that surrounded her. "Every major house, every influential publication has sent a representative... and they're all interested in meeting you, my pretty." This she addressed to Sherry, giving emphasis with a jab of her cigarette holder. "Come, walk with me a moment, my darling."

Sherry glanced at Brut then fell in step alongside the older woman.

"I envy you, Sherry. You are a very beautiful girl, Sherry. I am not telling you anything new. You have known that since you were in pigtails. But that is not what I envy. You are on the threshold of a new life, a new career. Everything you have worked for in the past has led you to this moment. You are about to embark on an

adventure that only one in a thousand of the girls who step onto the catwalks ever gets to make. After this weekend, nothing will ever be the same for you, my dear. That is what I envy—that wonderful adventure that will be your life. Enjoy it, my dear. Savor it. Make the best of it, whatever it may bring. Because it does not last forever."

Sherry turned to look at Merlot, who was staring out at the open water. In the years since she had first signed on with the agency, they had rarely spoken about anything besides assignments, clothes, cosmetics and the usual idle gossip. Still, she had always felt a bond with the former fashion model, one far closer and tighter than she'd ever known with her biological mother. And it had never felt stronger than at that moment.

"Merlot... I don't know what to say," she said around the lump in her throat.

"Then don't," the older woman said, turning her head slightly in order to favor her prize pupil with a smile. "Tell me, what do you think of the ship? Isn't she wonderful?"

"Oh, yes. It's marvelous. But how in the world were you able to afford it?"

"An old flame of mine owns the cruise line it belongs to. He owed me a solid and I called it in. Viola. That is what I like about millionaire playboys. They can afford to be old-fashioned gallants. Mark my words, my dear—you would be wise to make a hobby of collecting such men. Granted, they're not as exciting as rock stars or as handsome as models, but they are far more appreciative of a beautiful woman's attentions."

"What a wicked thing to say," Sherry said, giggling into her palm.

Merlot shrugged and gave a half laugh. "You may think I'm being silly, or wicked, but I'm merely giving you advice. You're never too young to think about what you will do once you no longer can work in front of the cameras. Nothing lasts forever—especially looks. But that is still a long time from now. Run along with your young man and have some fun. Pay no mind to an old woman who's had a little too much sun and not enough drinky-drinky. Speaking of which," she said, looking about with a scowl on her face. "Where the hell is Carlo with my appletini?"

Horace Fischer had wanted a cigarette boat ever since he was a college student and saw them on *Miami Vice*. The idea of having that kind of power and speed at his fingertips, pushing him across the water at speeds of up to a hundred miles an hour had always fascinated him.

So, when he had finally made partner at the firm, he had bought the forty-two footer as a present to himself. And why the hell not? When he was on dry land no one paid him any attention. Even though he made five times the average American's annual salary, he wasn't much to look at. Just another paunchy white guy with thinning hair and middle age spread dressed in Dockers and a polo shirt. But when he was on the water, people on the shore stopped what they were doing to look at him. The guys all envied him while the chicks wondered if he was married. At least that's what he liked to think they thought. That's why he'd named his boat *LookSea*.

He could tell there were women on the cruise ship leaving the dock. He'd glimpsed them earlier, frolicking on the sun deck and promenades in their sundresses and bikinis. Maybe he could get some of them to look his way if he came in close. Maybe even some of them would wave. For a brief moment he could pretend he was an international playboy, one accustomed to having beautiful women accompanying him everywhere he went.

Horace glanced over at the ship, in case there were bathing beauties lining the starboard rail. To his surprise and delight, he could see a stunning blonde number perched atop one of the bulwarks, waving in his direction. Even though he was close enough to be experiencing chop from the outgoing ocean liner, he decided to swing back around so he could make sure she was a hottie. As he brought his boat about, he lifted one hand to return his admirer's wave.

It was at that exact moment that the manatee surfaced in front of *LookSea*.

The manatee was a large, grayish-brown aquatic mammal with a body that tapered down to a wide, flat, paddle-like tail and had two front flippers. The creatures averaged about ten feet in length and could weigh upwards of a thousand pounds. Despite looking like a toothless walrus, manatees had a long history of being mistaken for the mermaids of legend by horny, near-sighted sailors.

While Horace Fischer was indeed horny and very possibly near-sighted, he certainly had no trouble identifying the obstacle directly ahead of him as a manatee.

Like all recreational boaters in Florida, Horace was well aware that hitting the slow-moving sea mammal with his boat would not only kill the poor, endangered creature, but also result in a substantial fine. Barely able to control his boat even under the best of conditions, Horace quickly corrected his course.

He glanced over his shoulder in time to see the manatee, startled by the noise of the twin five hundred and fifty horsepower, stern-mounted engines, quietly sink below the harbor's surface. Heaving a sigh of relief at having narrowly avoided a two thousand dollar fine, he turned his head back around to be greeted by the sight of the *Coral Clipper* rushing toward him. He screamed and instinctively raised his arms to shield his head and face, but it didn't really do much good as they collided at ninety miles an hour.

The ten thousand pound cigarette boat, engines still revving, struck the *Coral Clipper's* starboard side as if it was an armor-piercing shell, punching a gaping hole just below the larger vessel's waterline.

Chablis was seated atop the starboard railing on the promenade deck of the *Coral Clipper*, waving at the middle-aged jerk in a speedboat that had been buzzing the bay for most of the afternoon. It was Sergei's idea, really. Or was it Serge? She had trouble keeping them straight sometimes. In any case, it was his idea, not hers. She thought it was old hat, but went along with it. It was all grist for her portfolio. As she brushed the hair from her eyes, she glanced back in

the direction of the open water and was surprised to find that the cigarette boat was no longer anywhere to be seen.

Suddenly there was a huge noise, like a sonic boom, and the ship shook as if it had suddenly run aground. Chablis gave a tiny, almost girlish scream as she toppled backward off her perch. Sergei (or was it Serge?) dropped his camera and lunged forward, but was too late to catch her.

As Chablis fell she had the presence of mind to take a deep breath to prepare herself for the water. However, she had not foreseen striking her head against the railing of the deck below during her tumble. She struck the water with the grace of a hundred pound bag of potatoes, but with nowhere near the buoyancy. She floated face down for about five seconds before sinking like a stone below the surface.

Shiraz was having a very good time, flaunting her exquisitely toned body as she flirted with the bassist on the raised platform next to the swimming pool. She was dressed in a Jean Paul Gaultier sea-blue and green chiffon top and stretch tiered skirt, which made her look like an exotic gypsy flamenco dancer. She moved forward, placing herself directly in front of one of the six foot high bass speakers mounted in front of the stage, undulating to the throbbing fusion of funk and salsa that was the band's trademark.

All of a sudden there was a sound like a clap of thunder and the entire ship jerked violently, causing the tether that secured the two hundred pound amplifier to give way, allowing it to shoot forward on its casters as if fired from a cannon. The runaway speaker slammed into Shiraz with the force of a motorcycle, taking her along for the ride as it hurtled across the deck and into the open swimming pool.

By the time she realized what had happened, she was on the bottom, pinned underneath the bulk of the speaker, the chlorinated water burning her eyes and sinuses. She screamed for help, but all that reached the surface seven feet above her head was a stream of bubbles.

Chardonnay took the long glass tube offered her by an up-and-coming Milan designer who specialized in women's handbags and other leather accessories, and leaned over the silver serving tray covered with lines of finely chopped cocaine.

As she placed the end of the tube to her right nostril there was a deafening crash and the entire ship shook, sending her head to whiplash forward. There was a brief, searing-hot moment of pain as the coke straw penetrated first her sinus cavity, then continued into her brain. Chardonnay dropped across the tabletop as blood and spinal fluid oozed its way down the tube, diluting the cocaine into pinkish-white goo.

Merlot had been inside her stateroom, changing from her afternoon into her early evening wear, when the *LookSea* rammed the *Coral Clipper*. The impact threw her against a bulkhead hard enough to bruise a rib, but she was otherwise unharmed. Slipping on her shoes, she stepped out of her cabin and back onto the sun deck.

Where moments before her guests had been carefree and enjoying themselves, now the decks were awash with frightened partygoers, many of them sporting cuts and broken bones to go along with their Armani wristwatches and Gucci purses.

"We've been hit!" screamed a Parisian designer.

"We're sinking!" shrieked the assistant editor for *Vogue Italia*.

"People, people!" Merlot shouted, waving her arms in a desperate attempt to regain some semblance of control. "Please don't panic. We've barely left the dock. Everything will be—"

Before she could finish her sentence a siren began to blare, drowning out her voice, followed immediately a second, more powerful explosion that came up through the very bowels of the ship as the cigarette boat's one hundred and fifty gallon gas tank blew up inside the engine room.

The already existing confusion instantly dissolved into utter chaos as the guests began rushing back and forth like trapped mice, screaming and crying at the top of their lungs.

The former fashion model's prone body was trampled underfoot by a herd of panicked glitterati wearing the finest in designer shoe leather. Merlot clawed desperately at the legs of those running blindly to and fro until she grabbed a familiar pair of men's Prada loafers as they crossed her field of vision, managing to sink her manicured nails into the owner's ankle. Marshalling every ounce of her remaining strength, Merlot pulled her frail body into an upright sitting position.

Unable to take a deep breath without feeling searing pain, the best she could manage was a throaty croak: "Carlo, darling. Help me."

The younger man glared down at her bruised and bloodied face, his handsome features contorted by equal parts fear and revulsion.

"Get away from me, old woman," he snarled, kicking her as hard as he could in order to break free of her grasp.

Merlot collapsed onto the deck, her lower jaw broken, gagging on her own blood, as her lover fled the upper deck.

"My party," she mumbled, the words bubbling out of her ruined mouth in a red froth. "My beautiful party."

Her right arm began to tingle from the shoulder down and there was an abrupt constriction in her chest as if her heart had instantly petrified. She clawed at her chest with the fingers of her left hand as she struggled to breathe around the shard of rib lodged in her lungs.

Her final thought, before the darkness enveloped her for the last time was: Thank God I won't be around to read about this in the *High Society* page.

"People. People, please calm yourselves." The ship's captain stood on the bridge overlooking the decks below, trying his best to be heard through the bullhorn he held in his hand. "While it is true we are sinking and there is a fire in the engine room, we hope to have things under control shortly. However, the launching mechanism for the

lifeboats affixed to the starboard side has been damaged. I need you to take the gangway to the main deck in an orderly fashion. Those of you unable to be assigned to lifeboats will be given lifejackets."

One of the guests, a critic renowned for setting trends, leapt up, his eyes bulging from their sockets. "He's saying there aren't enough lifeboats. It's every man for himself."

"No. That's not what I said. Listen to me—"

But it was too late. A voice that the assembled all recognized as an authority in their world had spoken. The riot that broke out amongst the party guests was as ugly as its participants were fashionable. Chic designers bit and kicked influential magazine editors; photographers bashed out the teeth of faces famed for their symmetry and perfection, who in turn shrieked like bloodthirsty harpies as they gouged out the eyes of anyone within reach of their perfectly manicured nails.

As the surviving crew tried valiantly to bring order to the anarchy that surrounded them, the ship began to tilt downwards, sending deckchairs, passengers, and all other unsecured items sliding toward the bow.

Rose was fighting her way to one of the remaining lifeboats when she lost her footing and was sent sliding toward the prow of the ship. She screamed frantically as she pin-wheeled her arms, trying to keep upright, only to have her shrieks cut short when her fall was broken by the outer wall of the rear saloon. She closed her eyes and breathed a sigh of relief as she pressed herself to the bulkhead. However, her safety proved very short-lived, as the buffet table, still heavily laden, smashed into her, rupturing every internal organ from the waist down.

"Sherry, Brut—over here!"

Sherry heard Cabernet calling her name, but could not see her friend amongst the passengers frantically skirmishing for access to the lifeboats. Then there was a brief break in the fighting and she spotted Cabernet and Gunter clinging to the portside railing. Gunter

was doing his best to keep himself between his pregnant girlfriend and the insanity swirling about them.

Brut tightened his grip on Sherry's hand and pulled her toward their friends. Sherry risked a glance over the side of the ship and could see burning diesel fuel bleeding into the harbor. Thick, black smoke was billowing up from below deck. There was no doubt in her mind that the *Coral Clipper* was in its death throes, and that it was going to take everyone on board with it.

"What do we do, Brut?" Sherry sobbed as she and her friends clung to the railing to keep from sliding down the deck into the burning water below.

"I don't know!" he replied, shouting to make himself heard over the screams of the rioting party guests.

The ship was settling very rapidly, with the bridge and bow already under water. As the seawater rushed into the engine room there was a final, massive explosion that shook the vessel like a child's rattle. The explosion loosened Brut's grip on the railing and sent the male model tumbling headfirst down the nearly vertical deck and into the rapidly rising water.

"No!" Sherry screamed at the top of her lungs, stretching forth her right arm as far as it would, as if she could somehow summon Brut forth by an act of sheer will. "Don't leave me!"

"Sherry, listen to me," Cabernet said, her voice strained but still trying to sound in control. "Remember *Titanic*? Remember the end of the movie? We have to get to the back of the boat. It's our only chance!"

"Are you out of your mind?" Gunter shouted. "How do you know it will work?"

"It doesn't matter, does it?" Cabernet shot back. "What choice do we have?"

"She's right," Sherry said, nodding her head in vigorous agreement. So what if Cabernet was talking about something she saw in a movie? At least she had a plan.

The three of them made their way toward the stern of the ship, staying as close together as possible as they pushed past the remaining passengers and crew. In the few seconds it took them to

reach the rear of the promenade deck, the ship had continued its dangerous forward tilt, until it was almost standing on end in the water.

"We... have to climb over the back of the ship," Cabernet gasped as she pulled herself along the railing. "And jump as far as we can, so we don't get pulled under when the ship sinks."

"This is insane," Gunter moaned, shaking his head. "It will never work."

"It *has* to work," Cabernet replied. "We have to try for the sake of our baby."

Gunter opened his mouth as if to argue, but smiled and nodded his head instead.

Although her arms ached from the strain of pulling herself up a vertical incline, Sherry had little trouble climbing over the bulwark at the very back of the ship. She smiled at Cabernet and Gunter, who had yet to climb over, motioning for them to join her.

"Come on. It's easy. We're almost there."

Gunter pulled himself over the bulwark and railing and turned to take Cabernet's hand in order to stabilize her. The pregnant woman tried to hook her leg over the railing, but her belly was in the way. As Gunter leaned forward to tighten his grip, the ship shuddered like a winded horse, causing Cabernet to lose hold of the railing.

"I've got you!" he yelled.

The only thing keeping her from falling was Gunter, who was still gripping her right hand. Her body swayed back and forth like a pendulum as she dangled by her right arm. The pain made her eyes unnaturally bright.

"I... can't... hold... on..." Cabernet gritted out between clenched teeth.

"You've got to," Gunter said. "I'm not letting go of you."

"No. Save yourself." Her voice was strangely calm, despite everything going on all around her.

"I'm not leaving here without you and the baby."

"I love you," Cabernet said as she let go of Gunter's hand.

Although it all happened in a blink of an eye, it seemed as if Cabernet hung suspended in mid-air for several seconds, her arms

outspread, like she was about to take flight, before her body succumbed to gravity and plummeted into the madly churning waters below.

"Cabby!" Gunter screamed. "No!"

Before Sherry could react, the photographer climbed back over the bulwark and leapt feet first into the swiftly rising waters, leaving her on her own.

Sherry's brain was racing in circles inside her skull like a trick motorcyclist in a barrel. Sherry had never been so frightened in her life. Parading on the catwalks of Europe and posing on the beaches of Aruba and the Riviera had not prepared her in the least for what she was currently experiencing.

Whimpering like a frightened child, she turned to face the open water and, taking a deep breath, leapt as far as she could from the sinking ship.

She hit the water feet first, shooting downward at an angle like a bullet fired into a swimming pool. She kicked her legs and struggled upwards, her fear replaced by the urgent need to breathe. Upon reaching the surface she gasped in a lungful of air and saw the doomed vessel standing upright, looming above the level of the sea, framed against the gathering twilight like an angry finger pointed at an indifferent god. The only sounds she could hear were the cries of the other survivors treading water nearby, their voices unified into a horrific moaning, like that of the damned. Then, with a sudden rushing sound, a like that of water going down a drain, the *Coral Clipper* sank below the surface of the harbor.

The moment the ship disappeared, a terrible pressure grabbed her lower body and pulled Sherry back under the water. As the water closed about her head, she realized with horror that she had not swum far enough away to escape the suction caused by the sinking ship. She tried to swim back toward the rapidly dwindling light, but it was useless. No longer able to hold her breath, her airway relaxed involuntarily and seawater rushed in to fill her lungs. As her life spilled out of her in a stream of bubbles, her body continued to be drawn inexorably downward, where it would join the wreck of the

Coral Clipper and all the other fashionably late partygoers in the darkness at the bottom of the harbor.

THREE

She was no longer at the bottom of the harbor. The saltwater in her lungs wasn't there. It was replaced instead by fresh sea air. The cries of the dying became the screams of circling gulls. Her skin and clothes were dry, save for perspiration on her face and arms from exposure to the sub-tropical heat and humidity of Southern Florida.

Sherry looked around, confused by what had just happened—or rather not happened—to her. She was still on the pier, standing in line behind Gunter and Cabernet, with Brut to her side, all of them still very much alive, waiting to board the *Coral Clipper*. The hospitality officer was standing at the foot of the gangway, checking the party guests against a passenger manifest on a clipboard.

She blinked rapidly and shook her head to clear her vision. Had she blacked out? Was she hallucinating? If so, none of her friends seemed to have taken any note of it. They were all laughing and chatting as if nothing had happened. Sherry put a hand to her throat and was shocked to find her heart pounding as if she had run up several flights of stairs—or swum against the tide. Her mind swirled like a carnival ride as she tried to understand what had just transpired. There had to be a logical reason. She had done a little ecstasy in the cab. Not a lot, by her standards, but maybe that, combined with jet lag and the heat, had played tricks on her mind. Yes, that was it. Of course. She let out a relieved sigh and pushed aside the panic rising within her gut.

Her attention was captured by the sound of a powerful speedboat revving its motors. She looked in the direction of the noise and saw a forty-two foot cigarette boat out in the harbor. Her gaze dropped to its bow, where she could see the boat's name written in cursive with metallic gold paint: *LookSea*.

The fear she had succeeded in putting out of her mind came flooding back in, as cold and unrelenting as the water that had filled her airways as she screamed for help while she drowned.

Cabernet glanced over her shoulder and smiled at her, and Sherry was gripped by a horrible sense of déjà vu. Although her friend had

yet to speak, Sherry already knew what she was going to say before she opened her mouth.

"Gunter was only half joking," Cabernet said as they waited to be vetted against the guest list. "Everyone who is *anyone* in the fashion business will be on this ship—if they can make it. And if they can't, they'll send their right hands."

"You've seen top execs from Versace, Oscar de la Renta, Gucci and *Condé Nast* on the top deck." Sherry's voice sounded strangely flat in her own ears, as if she was talking from a great distance.

"Uh, yeah. That's right," Cabernet said with a slight frown, perplexed by Sherry finishing her sentence as well as her sudden odd demeanor. She was about to ask her friend if she was all right when someone on the ship distracted her. "Oh, look. There's Shiraz." Cabernet waved, trying to catch her fellow model's attention. "Shiraz! Down here!"

The tall, elegant African-American model leaned over the railing on the promenade deck and waved down at her friends on the pier.

Sherry stepped out of the line and, cupping her hands around her mouth to create a makeshift megaphone, shouted up at her fellow model.

"Shiraz! Get off the ship! You've got to get off the ship right now!"

Shiraz shook her head in disbelief and turned away from the railing, back toward the party.

"What the hell? Have you lost your mind?" Gunter snapped at Sherry, fixing her with a disapproving scowl.

"Gunter's right, Sherry," Cabernet said, her eyes showing concern for her friend. "Are you okay?"

Sherry turned and grabbed Cabernet by the elbow, digging her fingers into her flesh hard enough to make her wince. "You can't get on the ship either, Cabby. Not you, or Gunter or Brut."

"Why the fuck not?" Brut demanded, irritated by his girlfriend's erratic behavior.

"Because there's going to be an accident!" Sherry blurted. "There's going to be an explosion and a fire and the boat is going to sink and everyone's going to die."

"You're tripping," Gunter said with a dismissive snort.

"You've got to believe me, Cabby. I saw it all, as plain as day! But I didn't just see it; I felt it, too. I felt myself die." The fear made the words spill out of her mouth so fast she could barely breathe.

Cabernet looked back at Gunter, the concern for her friend now replaced by trepidation. "Honey, I don't know about this."

The photographer groaned and rolled his eyes. "Oh, please. She's on drugs."

"I've been around Sherry when she's high. She's never been like this before. Maybe there's something to it? I don't feel good about this."

"Oh, for the love of God!" Gunter threw his hands up, shaking his fists at the sky. "Models. They will be the death of me."

Whatever other curses Gunter may have had to heap on professional models was interrupted by Sherry shoving her way past him and onto the gangway leading up to the ship.

The hospitality officer shouted after her that she had to wait her turn, but Sherry ignored him and continued up the walkway. As she hurried along, she could not help but steal another glance in the direction of the *LookSea*, which was still roaring back and forth nearby.

The crewman stationed on the main deck gangway to greet and orientate the guests saw her looking at the powerboat. "These weekend boaters think they own the waterways," he said shaking his head.

"Once we clear the harbor it should be smooth sailing all the way down to Key West," Sherry said, speaking the words that were about to emerge from the sailor's mouth.

The crewman blinked, slightly taken aback to hear what he had planned to say spoken by the beautiful, wild-eyed woman before him. "Uh, yes, ma'am. That's correct."

There wasn't much time. She had to find the others and try and get them off the ship as fast as she could. The *Coral Clipper* would be casting off in just a few minutes. She darted toward the starboard gangway off the main deck, shouldering aside other passengers, who raised their eyebrows and clucked their tongues at her unseemly haste to reach the upper decks.

Chablis was coming down the stairs in the company of her photographer friend, just as Sherry knew she would be.

"There you are!" Chablis said leaning forward to peck at the air alongside Sherry's left cheek.

Sherry grabbed Chablis by the wrist, holding her tight so that their faces remained close, and whispered in her ear, "Get off the ship."

Chablis tried to pull herself away, but Sherry refused to let go. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"The ship's going to sink. Get off while you still can."

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard," Chablis exclaimed as she wrenched herself free of the other woman's grip.

"Merlot's been asking for me, right? Is she still on the top deck?"

Chablis gave Sherry an odd look as she massaged her wrist. "That's right. How did you know that?"

"I don't know, except that it's the same way I know the boat's going to catch fire and sink."

"You're not goofing, are you?" Chablis said as she studied her friend's face. Her original look of irritation changed to that of slight bafflement, mixed with worry.

"I've never been more serious in my life. Leave while you still can. I've got to go find the others."

Sherry resumed climbing up the stairs. When she made the promenade deck she headed toward the forward saloon, where she knew she would find Chardonnay.

The tall, willowy model was seated on a white leather couch, surrounded by minor designers from Milan and Venice. She was bent over the glass coffee table, busily chopping cocaine into a fine powder and arranging them into neat lines on a silver serving tray.

"Chard!"

The model looked up from her task and flashed her a worked-up smile. "There you are, sweetie. I was wondering when you'd finally get here."

Sherry pushed her way through the knot of Euro-trash surrounding her friend and put her hand on her shoulder. "You've got to get out of here, Chardonnay."

The other model's smile faded. "You've got to be kidding me, right?"

Sherry leaned forward so she could whisper into the other woman's ear without anyone overhearing her. "Chard, you've got to do as I say. You have to get off the ship. Something really bad is about to go down, and you don't want to be here when it does or you'll really know what it means to have your brain on drugs."

Chardonnay's gaze dropped to the coffee table covered in mounds of cocaine, then flicked back to Sherry. "There's going to be a bust?"

"Yeah. The coast guard's moving in right this minute." Sherry didn't have the time to try and explain herself any further. If it was easier to get Chardonnay off the doomed ship by letting her think a drug bust was going down, then so be it.

"Just get off the ship as fast as you can. I have to go warn the others."

Sherry left the forward saloon and headed in the direction of the live music that was coming from the aft section of the promenade deck. As she rounded the corner she could see the band, which was set up on a low riser positioned between the swimming pool and the buffet table. Sherry pushed her way through the waiters and party guests, unmindful of the dirty looks thrown her way by passengers and crew alike, as she made her way toward Shiraz, who was dancing in front of one of the speakers.

Sherry grabbed the model by the arm and tried to drag her away from the bandstand so she could talk without having to shout, but Shiraz jerked herself free of her grasp.

"What's up with you, girl?" Shiraz snapped. "You whack or what? First you yell at me to get off the damn boat, then you come up and try and drag me off. Bitch, you don't know me like that."

"Shiraz, I'm sorry about that, but we don't have time to mince words. You've got to get off of this thing. Right now. It's going to blow up and sink."

Shiraz gave a humorless laugh and shook her head, but there was a flicker of concern in her eyes as well. "You are whack."

"Shiraz, if you don't get off this ship, you're going to die!"

The intensity in Sherry's voice gave the other woman pause. She stared hard into her fellow model's face in an attempt to see if she was being played, but the fear and desperation she saw reflected in her friend's eyes seemed all too real.

"How the hell can you say you say that for certain?"

"I don't know. But if there is anything I do know for sure, it's if you stay on board, you won't live to see the sun set."

As Sherry turned away from Shiraz, she glanced up and saw Merlot standing at the railing on the upper deck, watching the party unfold. She hurried back toward the stairs and within seconds was on the sun deck.

"Merlot! Merlot, you have to leave the party."

The former model turned to fix her protégé with a disapproving stare. "My dear, why would I *ever* want to do something like that?"

Sherry felt her guts tighten as she met the older woman's gaze. "Don't ask me to explain how I know it, because I don't know why, okay? I just I do."

"Good heavens, child. Whatever are you babbling on about?"

"The ship! The ship's going to sink!"

Merlot raised one delicately plucked eyebrow, but otherwise remained calm. "Sherry, dearest. Have you taken something?"

"Yes. But that's not what's going on here. Merlot, please. You have to believe me. You have to get off the ship right now or you're going to die. *Everyone's* going to die!"

"Don't be silly, my dear. This might be a killer party, but no one here is in danger of dying! I'm afraid the sun might just be a little too much for you right now. Why don't you go lie down in your cabin until you're feeling better? You don't want your public seeing you in such a state—"

Sherry grabbed Merlot's hand, gripping it tightly in her own. "Please, Merlot, please. You *have* to leave!"

The older woman looked into Sherry's eyes and something she saw in them made her hesitate, if only for a moment. She then carefully but firmly pried the model's hand away. "I'm sure it's nothing, my dear. Go and rest. And even if there is something to what you say, a

good hostess never abandons her own party. It's like a captain going down with his ship."

Sherry knew Merlot well enough that nothing she could say or do from that moment on would change the older woman's mind. She was running out of time. If she stayed any longer, she ran the risk of being trapped aboard the *Coral Clipper* once it pulled away from the dock.

"I'm sorry, Merlot." Tears welled in Sherry's eyes as she stepped back and let go of her mentor's hand. "Goodbye."

The former model frowned, shook her head and returned her attention to the party unfolding before her. Sherry took one last look at Merlot's slender figure, framed against the open sky, then turned to go, only to find herself face-to-face with Carlo. The handsome young Italian had returned from the bar and was holding a margarita on the rocks in one hand and Merlot's appletini.

"Buona sera, signora. You are looking molto bella, no?" he said, flashing her his most winning smile.

Sherry snatched the margarita glass out of Carlo's hand and hurled its contents into his Michelangelo-perfect face. The Italian model stood there, dripping, too baffled to do anything but watch Sherry leave.

Upon reaching the main deck, Sherry found her friends gathered near the gangplank, talking amongst themselves in anxious, puzzled tones. They looked up as one as she approached them, the expressions on their faces ranging from extreme irritation to utter confusion.

"What the fuck's going on here?" Chardonnay demanded petulantly.

"Yeah," Shiraz agreed. "What's this about the ship sinking, and us dyin' and shit?"

"It's like I told each and every one of you—I don't know *how* I know what I know, or why. All I know is that I *know* it. In a few minutes there's going to be an accident, followed by explosions, fire, and the ship sinking—and sinking fast! All hell's about to break loose, and if you want to survive, you need get off this ship!"

Shiraz shook her head in disgust. "This is bullshit. Absolute bullshit."

"Is it bullshit that I know you're friendly with the bass player in the band?"

Shiraz blinked, taken aback. "How the hell did you know that?"

"Chablis, is it bullshit that you can't remember your photographer friend's name? You're not sure if it's Serge or Sergei, am I right?"

Chablis frowned and began to twirl a lock of her hair around her index finger. "That's not true. I mean..."

"Which is it? Serge or Sergei?"

"I... I dunno," she admitted.

The models exchanged nervous glances. Even though it was warm and humid, Shiraz wrapped her arms about herself as if suddenly chilled.

"And Chardonnay, doesn't one of the designers in the saloon have a coke straw made of glass?"

"Yeah, I've partied with him before. But he wasn't using it yet. How could you possibly know that?"

"Shit, girl," Shiraz said, pushing the others aside. "That does it for me. I'm getting the hell off this boat."

The others nodded their agreement and followed Shiraz to the gangplank. The hospitality officer was standing at the head of the ramp, motioning to a dockworker below as he pulled a chain across the entranceway. He looked up, clearly surprised to see four of the most beautiful women in the world bearing down on him.

"Is there something wrong, ladies? We're in the process of casting off."

"There sure as hell is something wrong," Shiraz said, hand planted firmly on her slender hips. "We want off this boat."

"It's a ship, ma'am."

"I don't care if it's a fuckin' submarine. We want off and we want off now."

"Very well, ladies," the hospitality officer sighed. He signaled once more to the dockworkers below and removed the chain, stepping aside so the frightened models could disembark.

"Hey, wait up!"

Sherry turned to see Rose hurrying toward them, an anxious look on her face.

"Where are you guys going?"

Before Sherry could think of an appropriate lie to make Rose go away, Shiraz turned around and waved for her to join them. "It don't matter where we're going. Just go!"

Rose hurried onto the gangplank, clattering after her fellow models. Cabernet, Gunter and Brut were still standing on the pier, and it was clear the pregnant woman and her boyfriend were having an argument.

"I refuse to get on that ship," Cabernet said, stamping her foot in emphasis.

"Very well, I give up!" Gunter shouted, throwing his hands in the air. "We won't go to Key West with the others."

"I'm not saying we can't go, baby," Cabernet said, touching her lover's stubbly cheek. "It's just that I'm not comfortable being on the ship."

Gunter's anger disappeared as quickly as it flared. He took Cabernet's hand and brought it to his lips. "Very well, my lovely. We'll rent a car and meet the ship in Key West."

"It's not going to make it that far," Sherry said grimly. "It'll catch fire and sink before it leaves the harbor."

Gunter glanced sourly at the *Coral Clipper* as the deckhands and dockworkers scurried about their appointed tasks, freeing the cruise liner of its gangplank and mooring cables.

"I still say it is nothing. But I won't have Cabernet upset. If she doesn't want us on the ship, then we won't go."

"Man, you are so whipped," Brut said.

Gunter raised an eyebrow. "Is that so? I don't see you on board."

Brut shrugged his shoulders. "I couldn't give two shits about Key West. South Beach is more my scene, dude."

The assembled models stood and watched the *Coral Clipper* pull away from the pier, its upper decks crowded with laughing, dancing

passengers dressed in the finest fashions Paris, Milan, and New York had to offer. Sherry could make out Merlot's figure, as poised and elegant as ever, silhouetted against the setting sun, but had to turn away, her eyes brimming with unshed tears.

"So, uh, when's that explosion thingy supposed to happen?" Chablis asked. It was clear from the tone of her voice and the look on her face that her fear was rapidly being replaced by doubt.

"I'm not sure," Sherry said, moving toward the very end of the dock. "Soon, though." She stared after the ship as it made its slow, stately way toward the open sea. Now that she was away from the ship, her sense of déjà vu had subsided rapidly, leaving her feeling more and unsure of her actions. Although she could not pinpoint the source of her ill ease, she could not help but feel that something was somehow wrong. But what?

She glanced back at her friends, standing several hundred feet behind her, watching her with that mixture of pity and nervousness one reserves for mentally ill loved ones who might prove potentially dangerous, then returned her gaze to the cruise ship. As she did so, it suddenly dawned on her what it was that was bothering her.

The cigarette boat was on the wrong side of the ship.

In her vision, the souped-up speedboat had been on the right-hand side of the ship, facing the open water. But now it was on the side facing the shore. But why? Why would something like that change from what she saw in her premonition?

As *LookSea* moved to run alongside the *Coral Clipper*, Sherry saw a dark-haired woman in a white sundress waving in the direction of the boat from the main deck. Although she could not get a good look from her vantage point, she somehow knew that Serge, or Sergei, having lost Chablis as his model for the evening, found someone else to snap photos of, on the opposite side of the ship. For a brief moment, Sherry's heart raced with hope that by her interfering with the scheme of things, even on such a minor level, she had somehow prevented the destruction of the cruise ship and all its passengers and crew.

Then she saw the pilot of the smaller craft take his hand off the steering wheel to wave at the pretty girl posed on the railing.

There was a terrific crashing sound, as if God had clapped his hands together,

As the cigarette boat plowed into the side of the *Coral Clipper*, the noise was even louder than Sherry recalled from her vision. She glanced back over her shoulder at the others and could see—but not hear—they crying out in horror at the sight before them. Then there was a second, even louder explosion. One that sent shockwaves across the harbor strong enough to make the various vessels moored in the harbor knock against their piers.

Sherry turned back to look in the direction of the ship, but all she could see was fire and twisted metal falling from the sky in her direction. Her instinctive response was to raise her right arm to try and shield her face.

Then suddenly everything went dark.

Very, very dark.

FOUR

It was the biggest show of the season. The air was superheated by the excitement and expectations of the audience, composed entirely of the rich and celebrated faces of the world's society pages. The click and whir of high-speed cameras filled her ears while the accompanying flashes winked at her from beyond the glare of the runway lights. She was outfitted in a Prada cotton and peacock feather dress, the eye-feathers cunningly fashioned into a miniskirt.

The royal blue bodice of the dress was adorned with a pearl stickpin by Laura Burch, and a golden Draugsvold necklace with embedded blue sapphires hung about her swan-like neck. Platinum earrings by Audrey Hu, a ruby Sarah Basch bracelet, and a pair of Alberta Ferretti wedges finished the ensemble. Her hair was swept up and held in place in a loose bun atop her head, in emulation of the blowsy café dancers from old Toulouse-Lautrec prints, by a single peacock feather.

She strode down the catwalk with the gait of a goddess made flesh, assured that every eye in the house was focused on her. It did not matter if their gaze was envious, lustful, or covetous. *They* were looking at *her*.

As she reached the end of the runway, she paused to allow the photographers pressed against the stage to take their fill of pictures, turning on her heel to best display the magnificent confection she was wearing. She looked out past the footlights and saw that the entire audience was smiling at her and nodding their heads as they applauded her.

She could see Merlot, Carlo at her elbow, seated near the front of the room. The older woman was dressed in a sprightly, bustled black and red polka dot Yves St Laurent chemisier dress with a wide black leather belt, black Lanvin double-strap stilettos, a Bottega Veneta wallet with gold chain, and a Tiffany watch with a lizard strap. Merlot, as was her custom, was fanning herself with a folded program as she bent her head to chat with the person seated next to her, an impeccably groomed African-American gentleman dressed in

a conservative charcoal gray three piece suit and carrying a walking stick.

As Sherry stood and watched Merlot talk to the stranger beside her, it suddenly occurred to her that she did not know which show she was at, or even what city she was in. Was she in Paris? Berlin? Milan? New York? Sherry continued to scan the audience, and spotted a slender older man dressed in a black turtle-neck and slacks, with appallingly bad skin, thick horn rim glasses, and a shock of cotton-white hair that stuck out from his head like a mass of straw. Although the odd little man seemed familiar to her, she did not immediately recognize him. Suddenly it came to her where she had seen the white-haired man before: posed alongside Merlot in one of the many framed photographs that hung on her office wall. A surge of alarm caused her heart to leap into a higher gear, and it was all she could do to keep the panic from showing on her face.

Sherry looked back at Andy Warhol and saw him lean over and speak to Audrey Hepburn, who was seated in the aisle directly in front of him. The actress, clad in a little black dress by Dior with matching black gloves and a string of pearls, smiled and nodded her head, then turned to share the witticism with Princess Diana. Years of training kept the mask of detached indifference from slipping from her face and revealing the growing horror as she came to realize that the glamorous dead surrounded her.

Her eyes instinctively went to Merlot, who was still seated between Carlo and the man in the gray suit. As the former model smiled up at her protégé, a thin trickle of blood oozed from one nostril. As Sherry knew her agent to be the epitome of grace under pressure, and also prone to imbibing cocaine every now and again, the sight did not unduly alarm her at first. Then the trickle became a steady stream, first from the right nostril, then from the left. Within seconds Merlot's entire lower face was a mask of crimson, until the gore steaming from her head obliterated her lipstick and covered her neck.

Carlo was dressed in a grey and white, two button stripe, Theory sport coat; a light blue merino V-neck Burberry sweater, storm-colored flat front Armani pants; his tanned and toned skin was

bloated and pasty from being submerged for more than a week. Indeed, in place of a silk necktie he wore a length of seaweed, still dripping from the harbor. As he handed Merlot a Martini glass filled with a vile, black slime, he turned his sodden head toward Sherry. She did not know if he was smiling at her or not, because the fish had eaten away his lips.

Merlot took the offered drink and lifted it in a toast to Sherry. As she brought it to her bloodied mouth, a small blue crab crawled out from between her lips. It was quickly followed by an eel, which spilled forth from its hiding place like a coil of bowel. As Sherry watched in horror, her friend's jaw unhinged itself, like that of a snake, causing her head to tilt backward until the crown of her skull touched the back of her, as a plethora of sea slugs, squid, and less identifiable deep-sea dwellers, boiled up her throat to spill onto her lap and skitter across the floor.

Sherry watched, mute with horror, as one of the chicest women on earth was transformed into an incubator for nightmarish marine creatures; the stranger in the gray suit stood up and pointed the head of his cane at Merlot, buried beneath a blanket of living sea creatures. As he did so, Sherry could see that the shaft of the walking stick was made of ebony and the head of sterling silver, fashioned in the shape of a human skull. Unlike the others seated before her, she could not make out the designer or label of the gray man's wardrobe and accoutrements.

"She is mine, now," the gray man said in a sepulchral voice, fixing her with eyes the color of smoke from a funeral pyre. He stretched out both his arms, swinging wide his cane to include the rest of the audience. "They're all mine!" He then pointed his skull-cane directly at Sherry, flashing her grin that made her skin crawl. "As you and your friends will be, in time."

He threw back his head and began to laugh, which echoed forth like rolling thunder. Sherry put her hands to her ears to try and muffle the horrible noise, but there was no escaping it. She looked back into the crowd only to find the auditorium empty, the chairs scattered and upended as if the spectators had fled the scene in a panic. Still clutching the sides of her head, she looked down and was

shocked to discover she was no longer wearing peacock feathers and gems, but a plain linen hospital gown.

That was when she screamed.

"Doctor? Doctor, I think she's coming around."

The woman's voice, concerned and yet detached at the same time, seemed to come from somewhere beyond the milky gray fog that surrounded Sherry. She could make out vague shapes moving in the mist, but whenever she tried to focus her attention on them and bring them into tighter focus she felt herself start to slide back down the slippery dark slope she had just clawed her way out of.

"Thank you, nurse." It was a man's voice. One she didn't recognize.

One of the shadowy figures moved closer to her and took on more definition. It was an older man dressed in a white coat with a plastic ID pinned to the front pocket.

"Miss Pulaski? Miss Pulaski, I'm Doctor Garner. Can you hear me?"

At first Sherry didn't know whom he was talking to, then she realized he was calling her by her legal surname. She groaned by way of answer to his question.

"Miss Pulaski, you've been in an accident. You've been unconscious for quite some time."

"Boat," Sherry mumbled. "Blew up."

"That's right, Miss Pulaski," Doctor Garner said, talking a little louder and slower than normal. "There was an explosion. You were injured by flying wreckage. That was a month ago. You've been in a coma the whole time."

"Where am I? Miami?" She tried to turn her head back and forth to try and get a better view of her surroundings, but the fog, although not as thick as it originally was, still refused to disperse.

"No. You're in Manhattan. You were flown up here as soon as you stabilized. You're at Saint Ignatius Hospital."

"Am I... okay?"

The doctor hesitated for a moment before answering. "Now that you're back amongst the living, I'll be working to make sure your recovery is as swift as possible."

"Am I okay?"

"You still have all your limbs. And there is no reason we should not be able to return the full use of your right hand."

His voice was trying so hard to calm and soothe her, but all it did was agitate her all the more. Sherry struggled to sit up and she could hear some kind of medical monitor start to beep frantically as she began to move.

"Answer me," she sobbed. "Am I okay?"

The doctor sighed and looked over at the nurse, who was standing beside him, a hypodermic syringe of tranquilizer in one hand. "Miss Pulaski, you're in the Burns Unit."

Sherry's heart sank as if it had suddenly been turned into stone. She knew now why she seemed to see the world through a scrim: she was looking through the gauze bandages swaddling her damaged face.

That's when she started to really scream.

Doctor Garner motioned for the nurse to step forward and administer the sedative. Within moments of the drugs being administered to her IV tube, Sherry slid back down that slippery dark slope. But this time, she knew what she was experiencing wasn't a dream.

It was a nightmare.

In the first few days following her emergence from her coma, Sherry requested that the hospital staff bring her as many magazine and newspaper reports of the accident as they could find. Although she had been there and witnessed the devastation first hand, she needed to measure the full scope of the tragedy as filtered through the eyes and ears of the world's media.

She quickly learned that the reason why the ship exploded so soon and so hugely was because the cigarette boat had penetrated the

cruise ship's hull and ignited its fuel supply. According to all newspaper accounts the passengers and crew never stood a chance of escape, much less rescue.

She also learned that what proved to be Merlot's final party had indeed caused repercussions throughout the world of high fashion, but hardly the kind her old friend had intended. A veritable who's who of designers, editors, art directors, photographers, models, retail tycoons and advertising executives had come to an untimely and decidedly unfashionable end. Many within the industry even went so far as to compare it to the World Trade Center in terms of the devastation and economic chaos it had wrecked on their community.

There were a lot of column inches also dedicated to interviews and follow-ups of the handful of partygoers who had been lucky enough to leave the ship before the disaster struck. Sherry found it interesting that all of the survivors that were interviewed, save one, neglected to mention she was the reason they got off the ship. The only one that talked about Sherry's premonition that disaster was about to strike was Cabernet, although the journalist doing the reporting was of the opinion that her "impending motherhood" had more to do with her deciding not to get onboard the doomed ship than an "inexplicable vision of disaster" by her best friend. Sherry thought it made more sense, too. She wished she knew why she had seen what she did that day, but there was never any answer to be found. And, in the long, painful weeks that were to follow, there was many a time she envied those who had died on the ship.

The next three months were the worst Sherry had ever known. Her days largely consisted of the burns to her right shoulder, arms and hand being cleansed and debrided of dead tissue by immersion in whirlpool baths. The scarring to her face and neck, however, required that the dead tissue be excised with scalpels and lasers.

Skin grafts from her unaffected back and abdomen were applied to the second and third degree burns, then covered by a clear plastic pressure mask, similar to a goalie's in hockey, so that the transferred layers of epidermis would take.

Doctor Garner also subjected her to several rounds of Z-plasty, most of it designed to return a degree of mobility to her right arm,

which had suffered severe contracture as a result of the accident. That meant removing the old scar tissue around her right armpit and closing the wounds using a Z-shaped pattern that could be repositioned to conform to the natural creases in Sherry's skin. While it did give her back the use of her arm, she soon discovered her reach had been shortened by four inches. Then there was the daily torture ritual of having her dressing changed, the very thought of which often reduced her to tears.

The only bright spot in her life was the weekly visit Cabernet made to see her. She would arrive bearing flowers, candy and the latest gossip from the Garment District. One of their favorite topics of conversation was planning for the baby, which now swelled Cabernet's belly so greatly her bellybutton was turned inside out.

Sometimes Cabernet would comb Sherry's hair for her, or manicure the nails on her left hand. With her breezy tone and easy manner, she made Sherry feel almost as if nothing had happened.

Almost.

Occasionally Cabernet's gaze would flicker to Sherry's face, or rather, what was left of it, and pity would fill her eyes before she quickly looked away. Whenever Sherry noticed her friend was looking at her, she would fall silent and with drawn, and not long after, Cabernet would find some excuse to leave.

Shortly before her scheduled release from the hospital, Cabernet showed up with a huge box of Godiva chocolates wrapped in a bow made of gold lamé.

"What are these for?" Sherry said with a laugh.

"To celebrate your release from this place," Cabernet said, smiling.

"I couldn't possibly eat these," Sherry said, pushing them back across the bed toward her friend.

"What possible harm could they do?" Cabernet said with a shrug.

"The worst thing that could happen is you get fat."

The words made Sherry flinch, even though she knew her friend had meant nothing by it. Every reminder that she no longer had to worry about what she looked like stung her like a horsefly.

"Sherry..." Cabernet was standing by the window, nervously playing with the sash pulley that controlled the Venetian blinds. "I'd

like to ask you a favor."

"Favor?" Sherry tried to smile, the mask and the swelling from the skin graft made it made it hard to speak, much less show emotion. "What possible favor could I do for you in my condition?"

"I'd like you to be the godmother of my baby."

It took Sherry a long moment to find the words to respond. "Jesus, Cabby. Why me?"

Cabernet laughed and shook her dark head in amused amazement. "Why you? Because if it weren't for you, this baby wouldn't exist to be born, that's why. Sherry, Gunter and I owe you our lives—and the life of our child. We talked it over the other night and decided it was only right that you be the godmother. What do you say?"

"I'd be honored, Cabby," Sherry said, her voice tight with emotion. She carefully daubed at her exposed eyes through the mask, fearful of doing anything that might traumatize the skin graft underneath.

However, Cabernet would prove not to be Sherry's sole visitor during her recuperation.

"Stephanie? Are you awake? It's me, your mom."

Carla Pulaski was a short, ample-bosomed woman in her late forties, with blondish, going to gray hair teased and shellacked into a helmet capable of repelling rain, if not actual bullets. She was dressed as she usually was, in a woman's jogging suit, the sweatshirt of which boasted an airbrushed picture of a kitten with glued-on fake sapphires for eyes.

"Why are you here?"

Mrs Pulaski was visibly taken aback by the hard edge in her daughter's voice. "Why wouldn't I be here, darling? We're family."

Sherry sighed and closed her eyes, hoping her mother would mistake it for sleep and leave, but no such luck.

"I realize we haven't been as close as a mother and daughter should be, but that's all in the past now. It'll be time for you to leave the hospital soon, and we need to get things prepared ahead of time for when you come home."

"Home?" Sherry opened her eyes. "Home, where?"

"Why, Allentown, of course. Where else?"

"Oh, no. I'm not going back there! I can't go back there. Not looking like this."

"Steffie, baby, you can't stay in New York. You have to sell the condo and whatever furnishings you have and move back in with me."

"I don't have to do anything. And I certainly don't have to do anything you tell me to."

"That's it! I've taken all I'm going to from you, Stephanie."

"Don't call me that. It's not my name."

"It sure as hell is your name. I didn't name you Sherry, that was that old bitch's idea, not mine."

"It's not my name anymore. I had it legally changed a couple of years ago."

"What?" her mouth's dropped open in amazement. "You're Sherry Pulaski?"

"No. Just Sherry. Merlot said that with a face like mine, I didn't need a last name."

Mrs Pulaski gave a short, brutal laugh. "That's for sure." She shook her head, pursing her lips into a sour frown. "You still don't get it, do you? It's over. You're kaput. Have you looked at yourself? No one wants you now. You no longer have a job as a model, much less a career. Merlot is dead and all your contracts have been torn up and assigned to other girls. There's *nothing* left for you in New York."

"Get out of here!" Sherry shouted. She grabbed the closest thing within reach of her good left hand—a metal bedpan—and hurled it in the direction of her mother. The projectile missed the older woman's head by a matter of inches and rang like a gong when it hit the wall behind her.

"I should have known better than to come here," Mrs Pulaski snorted.

One of the duty nurses stuck her head inside the room. "Is there something wrong?" she asked, looking quizzically at mother and daughter.

"I was just leaving," Mrs Pulaski said in a clipped voice.

"And don't come back," Sherry sobbed, her anger dissolving into tears.

Mrs Pulaski left the room without looking back. All Sherry could think as she watched her mother walk out of her life forever was that if she still had the original reach on her right arm, she would have beaned the bitch for sure.

The day Sherry left the hospital for home was not one of Manhattan's best. The sky was full of rainclouds, accompanied by bursts of chilly wind, which could have turned an umbrella inside out faster than a magician's glove. In a way, Sherry was actually relieved that the weather was so shitty. It meant there were fewer people on the street to look at her as she stood on the curb and tried to hail a cab.

Since the clothes she had been wearing when she was admitted to the hospital had been cut off her in the emergency room, she had borrowed some of Cabernet's pre-pregnancy wardrobe. As she walked out of the Burns Unit, she was dressed in a gray, herringbone, rayon blend dress skirt with matching suit coat by Phoebe, a pale blue striped cotton blouse with a ruffled dickey by Akiko Ogawa, black leather Charles David pumps and a leather Cara Landy handbag. Not that it mattered how she was dressed. She might as still be wearing her hospital gown for all the good it would do her.

This was not the first time her ravaged face was seen by others. During her physical therapy it had been standard practice for her to walk the hospital corridors to try and return muscle tone and coordination to legs that had begun to atrophy during her coma. But that had been the Burns Unit, where damage and deformity was relative. Now she was in the outside world, where everyone else had whole, healthy skin covering their faces, not a crazy quilt of scars, sutures and grafts.

All her life—or as much of it as she could remember—Sherry had been the focus of admiring glances and appraising looks. When she was very young, old ladies had routinely complimented her outfits

and told her mother how lucky she was to have such a beautiful little girl. As she grew older, she still had vocal admirers, but they no longer were restricted to old ladies and they certainly had no interest in talking to her mother. She had grown up accustomed to being the center of attention and having eyes follow her every move. That was still the case now, although for drastically different reasons.

If a man was staring at her, the look on his face was one of disgust, not lust. The girls who had once envied her beauty and poise looked at her with pity, if not open revulsion.

"Taxi!" She instinctively raised her right arm to hail a passing cab, or tried to. She grimaced as the contracture from the third degree burns around her armpit pulled her limb short. The taxi sped by, ignoring her.

She thought about calling Cabernet again, but decided against it. Her friend had already apologized for not being available to escort her home from the hospital because of an ultrasound appointment.

She glanced over to a nearby bus shelter, where a woman was standing with a boy about six years-old. The child grabbed his mother's shirtsleeve and began tugging on it.

"Look, Mommy, look," he said, pointing at Sherry. "That lady looks like Freddy Krueger!"

The boy's mother involuntarily looked where he was pointing and immediately blanched. She grabbed her son's hand and gave him a hard jerk. "Julio, be quiet! It's not nice to point."

That was it.

"Taxi!" Sherry shouted, stepping off the curb as she raised her left hand as high as it could go.

A yellow sedan came to sharp halt next to her, fishtailing slightly on the rain-slicked pavement. Sherry clambered into the back seat before he could get a good look at her face. Within ten minutes they were pulling up in front of her converted loft condo in SoHo.

She leaned forward and shoved a fifty through the hole in the Plexiglas partition that separated the driver from the passenger. As the cabbie turned in his seat to hand her back her change, he finally got a good look at her face.

"Jesus, lady."

Sherry exited the cab without taking the money, moving as fast as she could across the pavement to the glass and brass doorway of her building. The driver opened his door and waved a fistful of wadded up tens, fives and ones at her.

"Hey, lady. You forgot your change."

"Keep the damn change!" she shouted at him over her shoulder as she ducked inside the apartment building.

Sherry's condo was located in a former big name furrier's cold storage warehouse, which had been converted into loft-style apartments during the last decade. The foyer for the building was lined in marble, with a concierge desk located just past the mailboxes situated inside the front entrance and the bank of elevators.

The dayshift doorman, George, looked up from his copy of the *New York Post* as she headed toward the elevator. "I'm sorry, ma'am. You need to be announced before you can enter the building."

"I live here."

"Lady, I know all our tenants and I've never seen you before."

Sherry lifted her chin, so that the light from the sconces, which were set flush into the marble walls, fell onto her face. George's eyes widened in shock and his face momentarily lost its prissiness.

"Oh, Miss Sherry! I... I didn't recognize—I mean, I didn't know you would be coming home this early."

"That's okay, George," she muttered. "You're just doing your job."

To her relief, no one else got on the elevator while she rode it to the top floor. The area of Manhattan she lived in still had a lot of the old buildings that pre-dated the skyscrapers, so her view of the skyline was relatively unimpeded. That, and the trendy reputation of loft living, was the reason for her buying into the condo.

She already had her keys in her hand as she left the elevator, and wasted no time unlocking her door and closing it behind her. There was a table just inside the front door, heaped with mounds of mail. She picked up a handful of envelopes and thumbed through them. A few appeared to be get well cards, but the majority seemed to be medical bills and notices from her mortgage company. She was too tired to even think about sorting out the mess before her. She tossed

her house keys into the little bronze caddy she'd picked up antiquing a year before and stepped inside the apartment.

It was dark and smelled dusty and stale, exactly how an apartment smells after being closed up for four months. She groped for the switch inside the door and suddenly there was light, illuminating the group of people standing in the middle of the room.

"Surprise!"

Cabernet, Gunter, Brut, Chablis, Chardonnay, Rose and Shiraz were standing in a semicircle facing the front door. Hanging above their heads was a printed banner that read: "Welcome Home".

Sherry looked at the door, trying to decide whether or not to flee, but Cabernet, dressed in Calvin Kleins and Burberry plaid, stepped forward, arms held open wide. "We're sorry if we scared you, sweetie."

She led Sherry to the sofa, motioning to the others with her free hand. Chablis and Chardonnay, exquisite in their Ralph Lauren frocks, nodded and disappeared into the kitchen, to return with a decorated cake and a bottle of champagne.

"I... I just wasn't expecting anyone, that's all." Sherry mumbled.

"We know, silly," Shiraz said with a laugh, flashing her perfect white teeth as she absently ran a hand over her gold silk Miu Miu original. "That's why it's a surprise."

"I'm not ready for this," Sherry whispered as she squeezed Cabernet's hand.

The pregnant woman's smile flickered as she saw the look of anguish in her friend's eyes. She honestly had not considered how Sherry would react when confronted by the flawless beauty and perfect bodies of her old friends.

"Let's get this party started," Chardonnay said, rubbing her hands together briskly. "Where do you keep the music around here?"

"I can show you that," Brut said. Sherry could not help but notice how Rose automatically trailed after him as he walked over to the entertainment center, her low-cut Valentino leaving nothing to the imagination.

"So, how are you feeling, Sherry?" Chablis asked, using the same inanely cheerful tone of voice reserved for small children and the

very old.

"How do I feel?" Sherry said, parroting her words back at her. "I'm depressed, in a lot of pain and scarred for life. But you'd know if you ever came to see me while I was in the hospital."

The awkward silence that followed her outburst seemed to stretch to eternity. Brut rubbed the back of his neck while staring at his Gucci boots while Chablis, Rose, Shiraz and Chardonnay exchanged embarrassed sidelong glances with one another.

"Yeah, well, about that, babe," Brut said apologetically. "We've all been pretty busy since the accident..."

"Yeah," Chablis agreed, nodding her head. "Brut's right. After the accident we all had to scramble to find new reps, new work. What with Merlot dead and all the other execs from the company gone, her contracts were no longer any good. We're all with different agencies now. I'm with Marilyn; Chard got picked up by New York Management..."

"Yeah, I'm with Trump Management now," Shiraz chimed in. "And Rose is with IMG."

"What about you, Brut?" Sherry asked, not bothering to disguise the edge in her voice. "Where are you now?"

"I'm, uh, with IMG too," he said, coughing into his fist. "Besides, babe, we all came to see you right after the accident. You just don't remember it, that's all."

"I was in a coma."

"Yeah, that thing," he said, nodding his head. "We've all been off trying to get our careers back on track and putting all that negative shit behind us."

"We'd never forget you, Sherry," Chardonnay said placing her hand on her shoulder. "How could we? You saved our lives."

"Do you really mean that?" Sherry asked, tilting her head so that Chardonnay had an obstructed view of her face.

The blonde model blanched and quickly averted her eyes as she struggled to keep her smile in place. "Of course we do."

"Chard's right," Shiraz said. "Everyone in this room owes the fact they're alive to you. That's why we decided to get together and get you something. She looked over to Gunter, who nodded and removed

a Dior hatbox from under the sofa and placed it on the coffee table, next to the cake and the unopened bottle of Bollinger.

"Go ahead, Sherry," the German said, for once his voice not dripping with sarcasm while speaking to her. "Open it."

The others moved in, forming a circle around her, as she lifted the lid off the circular box and moved the layers of tissue paper aside, revealing the Venetian mask nestled within. It was full-sized, from hairline to chin, with openings in the eyes, nose and mouth, and made of papier-mâché coated with thin, opalescent enamel that mimicked the healthy glow of European skin tone. The mask was hinged to a thickly padded headband, allowing the wearer to be able to lift and lower the artificial face without having to physically remove it every time. Sherry reached inside and removed the mask, lifting it as far as her damaged right arm would allow. As she looked into the mask's empty eyes, set within a features of classical perfection, she realized that the face was her own—once upon a time.

"It's absolutely *wicked*, isn't it?" Chablis said with a grin. "Gunter got this guy he knows in Venice to make it."

"All I did was provide him with photographs," Gunter said with a shrug. "He then ran them through a computer imaging system, to recreate your face in three dimensions then sculpted a wax mold that would allow him to use the ancient technique of the Mascareri to generate a unique mask. One designed to be worn only by you."

"I think it's cool," Rose said breathlessly. "Hey, Gunter. What do you think he'd charge to make me one? I could look like Christiane from that French movie: *Les Yeux sans visage*."

Sherry slowly lowered the mask onto the coffee table. "Get out." Her voice was so quiet, so still, no one heard it. They were too busy laughing and chatting and trying to figure out what CD to play. So she said it again, louder this time. "Get out."

The laughter came to a sudden halt as the others exchanged confused glances back and forth, uncertain if they had actually heard her say what they thought she said.

"Excuse me?" Shiraz asked.

"Get out!" Sherry shouted it as loud as she could manage, standing up from the sofa so fast she knocked her shins on the coffee table.

"What the fuck? What did we do?" Chablis looked back and forth, trying to figure out what had triggered such a response from her friend.

"Just get out! Get out of my house!"

"Well, I never," Rose said huffily. "I know better than to stay where I'm not wanted!" She grabbed up her Prada coat and headed for the door. After a moment's hesitation, Brut followed her. As she disappeared down the corridor toward the elevator Rose's voice could be heard saying: "Honestly, I don't know *what* her problem is..."

Shiraz and Chardonnay grabbed their own designer wraps and hurried after them. "Hey, hold the elevator," Shiraz called from the doorway. "Maybe we can split a cab or something!"

"I'm so sorry, Sherry. We didn't mean to hurt your feelings," Cabernet said. "We just wanted you to be able to go places without making other people, I mean, without making yourself uncomfortable."

"Just leave," Sherry said, her anger beginning to turn to tears again.

"Are you sure you ought to be alone?"

"Go away."

"You heard her, Liebling," Gunter said in a clipped voice. "She doesn't want us here." He took his girlfriend by the arm and led her toward the open door. "It's time to go now."

Sherry stood trembling as Gunter slammed the front door of her apartment shut behind himself and Cabernet. She hurried over and slid the three deadbolts and door chain into place, sealing herself off from everyone and everything she used to know.

FIVE

Sherry's hurt at her friends' thoughtlessness, and anger at Brut's betrayal, boiled inside her stomach and head until they met halfway, turning her heart into a white-hot mass of hate. Screaming in a wordless rage, she snatched up the cake, which was sitting on the coffee table and stormed into the kitchen.

Alternately sobbing and swearing at no one in particular, she hurled the three-layer hazelnut cake, decorated with marzipan flowers and bearing the inscription, "Thank You Sherry", into the stainless steel sink. How dare they? How *dare* they fob her off with baked goods and a bottle of champagne? She grabbed the meat tenderizer from the utensil rack on the wall above the stove and pummeled the hapless confection into paste with a few swings of her left hand.

They owed their very lives to her, and how did they show their gratitude? By leaving her to rot in a hospital burns unit while they were busy flitting around the world on photo shoots. Turning on the faucet, she flipped the disposal switch on and used the weighted mallet end of the tenderizer to stuff the larger chunks of cake into its grinding rotary teeth.

As the last bit of pulped almond paste swirled down the drain, she looked to find something else to vent her wrath upon. The molten fury inside suddenly became biting cold as her gaze fell upon the Venetian mask, resting on its side on the coffee table, its empty eye sockets turned in her direction.

As if they had not done enough to humiliate her, they had to rub what was left of her face in her loss. She picked up the papier mâché face and marched back into the kitchen. She turned the right front key of the stovetop all the way to the right. There was a dry hissing sound, accompanied by the clicking of the self-lighting mechanism, and the ring ignited with a muffled huff.

Sherry held the mask out toward the blue flame, but as she looked at its impassively perfect face, her hand wavered. She could not bring herself to see her beauty, even in the form of cunningly crafted

paper, glue and paint, destroyed once more. She turned off the gas range and stepped back into the living room, holding the mask between her unmarred left and damaged right hand, its face tilted up so that it appeared to be looking up at her.

She had to admit, it was a very good likeness. From a distance, given the right lighting and the proper hairstyle or hat, it might even pass for flesh and blood. Looking into its vacant eyes, she found her rage was gone, replaced by a grief so deep it hurt to breathe.

No, venting her outrage at the monumental injustice done to her would not assuage the pain that tore her soul to shreds every time she caught a glimpse of herself in a reflective surface. Destroying reminders of her predicament did nothing but prolong the nightmare that had become her life, not end it.

It was time for her to face the facts—facts as ugly and obvious as the raised, red, ropelike scars that made her skin look like a partially cooled cheese pizza. She was on the verge of exhausting her savings, and the bank was only a month or so away from foreclosing on the condo. That did not take into account her medical and utility bills. She refused to crawl home to her mother and beg for forgiveness. It was clear from his distant behavior that whatever Brut had once felt for her had disappeared along with her beauty. But she had no skills outside of modeling and those doors were forever closed to her. What was the point of living if all she had to look forward to was destitution, humiliation and the pitying stares of those who once envied her life and her looks?

Sherry's gaze went to the "Welcome Home" banner, still hanging from the exposed pipe of the loft's overhead sprinkler system. It was one of those plastic-fabric hybrids you could buy ready made at instant-print shops scattered about the city, complete with pre-fixed grommets and nylon rope lashings.

She dragged one of the dinette chairs into the middle of the room and climbed on top of it, careful not to overbalance herself as she tried to pull the closest end of the banner free of its moorings. It wasn't easy to do, given the wobbliness of the chair and the impediment of her damaged right arm, but she finally succeeded.

Working as fast as she could, for fear her resolve would abandon her, she fashioned the loose end of the banner into a makeshift hangman's noose. After giving it a couple of good tugs to make sure it would hold, she took a deep breath and lifted the noose over her head. She took a long, last look at her surroundings, her gaze lingering over the entertainment center, the sofa, and other items of furniture from Ikea she and Brut had spent so many hours putting together between bouts of screwing and drug use. She wondered if she should leave a note, but then shrugged it off. It would be painfully obvious to anyone who knew her why she had killed herself. Even strangers could figure it out.

As she placed the noose about her neck, the chair she was standing on suddenly began to wobble. Sherry swore under her breath as she lost her footing, her suicidal intentions forgotten as she instinctively grabbed the banner to try and stabilize herself. There was a tearing sound the exact same moment the chair toppled over, and Sherry found herself falling through space. But instead of being brought up short by the hangman's knot, she hit the hardwood floor with a meaty thud.

Pain shot throughout her ribs, hips and legs, creating miniature bomb bursts of light behind her eyes. She struggled to take a breath, but her lungs refused to take in any air. A sharp stab of dread quickly replaced the pain as the thought crossed her mind that she might have been paralyzed in the fall. She began to whimper in fear for her life. It was one thing to die relatively quickly at the end of a makeshift rope, but quite another to die slowly of starvation and dehydration, lying on a hard, cold floor in a pool of her own waste.

Sherry's panic receded along with the pain from her fall, as she was able to once more breathe and pick herself up off the floor. She stared down at the banner, which she had intended to use as a means of killing herself. It was draped about her left shoulder and right torso, resembling nothing so much as the sash of a bedraggled beauty queen. As she worked to disentangle herself, her home phone began to ring.

Her side still aching from the fall, she hobbled over to the breakfast bar that separated the kitchen from the living room area.

She picked up the cordless phone from its cradle without bothering to check the caller ID.

"Hello?"

The caller on the other end of the line was a man, who spoke with a very deep, cultured voice that sounded oddly familiar. "You can not escape me by running into my arms."

"Huh?" Sherry frowned at the receiver. "Who is this?"

"Come now, don't be coy. We know each other all too well, my dear," the voice said with a chuckle that made the flesh at the base of her spine creep all the way up to her shoulders. "Who do you think tipped the chair a moment before? Today is not your time to die, just as the hangman's noose is not a remedy for your plight."

Sherry's eyes grew large with alarm and she looked around the room, trying to spot sight of cameras or other concealed surveillance devices, but nothing seemed to be out of place, and the drapes covering the windows were all pulled tight.

"What the hell is going on?" she shouted into the phone. "How could you possibly know what just happened here? Who are you? Answer me! Who are you?"

The only response to her questions was laughter, which echoed in her ears like the cries of the passengers of the *Coral Clipper*. The telephone receiver grew as cold as ice in her hands and she began to shiver uncontrollably. Sherry looked down at the caller ID, mounted in the cordless phone's cradle, trying to figure out who was responsible for the call. Instead of a ten-digit telephone number or the name of the listed user, the LCD display read: "DEATH".

Sherry gasped and her chilled fingers lost their grip on the receiver, dropping it to the floor. The laughter on the other end continued to spill forth, as if the caller had no need to stop to breathe or swallow.

"Stop it!" she wailed as she snatched the phone back up and slammed it back down into the cradle, severing the connection. "Leave me alone!"

Within seconds of her hanging up, the phone began to ring again. Sherry gave a tiny scream and jerked her hands away from the

receiver as if it was a rattlesnake buzzing its tail. The caller ID display still read: "DEATH".

"Stop it!" she screamed, clapping her hands over her ears as she backed away from the phone. "Stop calling me!"

But it didn't stop. The phone kept ringing. And ringing. And ringing.

Sobbing in terror, Sherry clawed at the deadbolts and threw open her front door, fleeing her apartment for the safety of the stairway. She didn't know where she was going, or even anywhere she could go. All she knew was that she couldn't stay in that place with that phone ringing in her ears.

It wasn't until she was on the street and saw the looks of alarm and disgust in the eyes of those she passed by that she realized she had left her apartment without a scarf or any other means of shielding her disfigurement from the general public. She gasped and quickly turned into a doorway of a nearby business, trying to cover her face with her good hand.

What in hell was happening to her? Was she going insane? Or was she already there? All she knew was that she could not bring herself to listen to any more of that horrible laughter. She began to weep, her shoulders shaking so hard she had to lean against the doorframe for support.

Then a phone began to ring.

It was a payphone stationed near the corner, directly across from the doorway she had chosen for shelter. Sherry lowered her hands from her tear-stained face and stared at it in disbelief as it continued to ring.

It was just a coincidence, that was all, she told herself. It was merely a payphone, a random payphone. It would ring three or four times then whoever was calling would hang up.

But they didn't hang up, and the phone continued to ring.

Despite her better judgment, Sherry felt a growing compulsion to answer the call. Even though she dreaded hearing the voice on the other end of the line, she was drawn to the payphone as if watching herself from a great distance. Her hand was shaking so badly when

she lifted the receiver from its hook she almost dropped it before bringing it to her ear.

The voice on the other end of the line gave a chuckle like dried knucklebones being rattled in a cup. "There is nowhere you can run where I am not already there. I am in the fishbone and the bullet alike. The rusty nail and the tiger's claw are all the same to me."

"What do you want from me?" Sherry whimpered.

"Want? Want is born of flesh. I have no needs, as you understand the term; merely requirements. And I require that you meet with me, my dear."

"Meet you? Where?"

"A little jazz club in the Village called the Black Key."

"Why do you want me to meet you there? I don't understand any of this—"

"I will tell you all you need to know once you arrive," the caller said, cutting her off before she could ask him any further questions. "Oh, and Sherry, my dear—don't be late."

Sherry sat in the back of the taxi watching the streets flash by, wondering about her sanity. She wasn't sure which was scarier—the possibility that she was completely insane or what was happening to her was real. If it was real, there was a slim chance it was a weird hoax; like on one of those celebrity reality television shows. If so, it was a tasteless joke that went beyond even the cruelest sense of humor. There was also a third likelihood that she was still lying in her hospital bed in a deep coma, dreaming all of this. That was the most comforting of the scenarios. But if she was trapped within a dream, it was the most vivid one she'd ever had experienced, even down to details such as the dandruff on the shoulders of the driver and the cigarette burns in the upholstery of the back seat.

Whether it was a dream, madness, or reality, she was on a rendezvous with Death; or at least someone who claimed to be him. Assuming Death had a gender in the first place.

Still, she could not run the risk, no matter how bizarre it might seem, that whoever, or whatever it was that had spoken to her over the phone was telling the truth.

"Here you go, lady," the cabbie said, bringing the taxi to a halt.

They were deep in the Village, on a narrow, crook-backed street lined with five storey brownstone walk-ups, the bottom levels of which had been converted into boutiques, restaurants and bars. A small neon sign shaped like a skeleton key was all that was visible of the club from the street. Sherry handed the driver a twenty, hastily exiting the car before he had a chance to realize that the perfect face in the rear-view mirror neither blinked nor moved its lips.

She hurried down the steps leading to the Black Key; her feet shod in embroidered suede, wedge Prada sandals. With her lowered head covered by a black silk scarf and her hands concealed with black velvet gloves, no one would have thought the tall, statuesque woman dressed in the putty-colored, faille flounced trench coat, and the black, organza and taffeta Christian Lacroix dancer dress with cascading ruffled skirt, was anything but a fashionable lady of means out on the town for a little discreet fun.

The interior of the club was dark, close and smoky, with intimate booths lining the walls and a cluster of tables in front of the small bandstand. A modern jazz trio composed of a pianist, an upright bass player and a clarinetist, were playing a medley of Bird tunes to a handful of listeners. She skirted the bar and the open tables and headed for one of the booths. Although she was uneasy when it came to the mysterious caller's intentions, she was equally fearful of being seen in anything resembling decent light.

"What would you like to drink, ma'am?" asked the cocktail waitress, who seemed to materialize from thin air the moment Sherry sat down.

"Vodka Martini. Grey Goose, if you have it," Sherry replied, keeping her face pointed down and slightly to one side.

"Yes, ma'am," the waitress said, jotting it down on her order pad.

"Ah, gray. My favorite color."

Sherry gave a small cry of alarm as she turned to face the voice at her elbow.

Sitting beside her was an African-American gentleman who looked to be in his early fifties dressed in a dapper, three-piece charcoal suit. He was thin, with a long face, strong nose and angular cheekbones, which gave him a decidedly saturnine appearance. His hair was close-cropped and rose into a widow's peak, with snowy temples, and his eyes were a disconcerting shade of pale gray.

"Where did you come from? How did you sit down without me seeing you?"

The stranger chuckled. It was the same dry, humorless sound she had heard over the phone. "I am always with you, my dear; as I am with every living thing. I simply do not choose to reveal myself until the time best suits me. I am everywhere and in all things, and have been since the beginning of time. The moment you were born, the seed of your death was planted, but only I know the time, place and means of your harvest. As we speak, I am taking a fisherman in Bangladesh who has fallen into a storm-swollen sea; I am rocking the cradle of a malnourished infant in the Ukraine; I am riding alongside a drunk driver on Highway 78 outside Tupelo, Mississippi. I am doing all these things a thousand-fold over, just as the red corpuscles within your body carry oxygen, and your lymphocytes generate antibodies to fight infection."

Sherry's brow furrowed behind the Venetian mask, unaccustomed to such longwinded talking. "So, Death is a black guy?"

The gray man shook his head, clearly amused by her statement. "What you see before you bears as much relationship to my true nature as that masque you wear does to your own visage. If I showed myself in a truer aspect, your brain would boil in its skull. I could have just as easily manifested myself as a handsome movie actor or a pallid young girl with too much eye make-up. No, child, I chose this form so you would be more receptive to what I have to say.

"Centuries ago, as mortal things reckon time, something like a god loved a mortal woman. His love for her was so great he gifted her with second sight. But the woman scorned the god-thing, so it turned what had once been a gift into a curse. Her vision was perverted, so that she could see the future clearly, but was fated to never be believed by those who sought her counsel. The oracle was doomed to

see her brothers slain, her sisters raped, and her city sacked, but was helpless to alter the course of events. She even foresaw her own enslavement and murder, but could do nothing to prevent them. Since that time her tortured spirit has roamed the Earth, seeking a chance to speak its auguries of disaster to those who might heed them. You were one such vessel. But tampering with fate is not without its hazards, as the scars that cover your face and arm are testimony to.

"You have disrupted the schemata, the Master Plan by which all things are kept in balance on this plane of existence. Because of your meddling, there are numerous souls living past their predestined harvest. Such dissonance to the Master Plan threatens to throw all of creation off kilter.

"It falls to me to correct the imbalance created by so many lives escaping my clutches. The repercussions could, very soon, be catastrophic, as these lives exist outside the schemata, interacting with people they were never meant to meet, doing things they were never intended to do. So many loose threads, creating even more loose threads. Soon they will jam the loom, and the very fabric of reality will begin to sheer and tear."

"What does this have to do with me?" Sherry asked. "Are you going to kill me?"

The corners of the gray man's mouth pulled themselves into a rictus grin. "Child, I would hardly need to bring you here to do that. No, I asked to meet you to propose business. There is a complicated system of checks and balances that control the world invisible to the human eye. As you were responsible for intersecting with the fates of the individual survivors, your presence is necessary to bring about their harvest. It is imperative that those who escaped their deaths be reclaimed by me in the exact order in which they were originally slated to die, and that all six be taken before the birth of the child."

Sherry felt something cinch itself tight within her chest. "What about the baby?" she asked, trying to keep the panic out of her voice.

"I'm certain even one such as you have heard the analogy concerning a butterfly flapping its wings in the Amazon and typhoons forming in the Indian Ocean. Once a life never originally

meant to exist is brought into the world, the entire schemata must be reworked, and new deadlines assigned to every living thing on the face of the Earth. With each reworking of the Master Plan, the chances of another anomaly such as yours increases exponentially."

"Are you saying that Cabby's baby being born will cause the end of the world?"

"No. I am saying the child's birth will seriously... inconvenience me." The gray man leaned forward, the skull underneath his flesh pressing itself against his coffee-colored skin, as if eager to burst forth, while his pale gray eyes dwindled in their sockets. "I do not appreciate being inconvenienced."

"I won't do it. I won't help you kill my friends," Sherry said, shaking her head.

"What if I 'sweetened the deal', as you mortals say?" Again the gray man showed his teeth in a death's head grin. "The scars you carry on your face and body were never meant to be. They only exist because you acted to save the lives of those you called your friends. What if I told you that with every life you help usher back into the fold, a portion of your former beauty will be restored?"

"I'd say you were lying," Sherry said.

"A fair enough response," the gray man said with a laugh that creaked like the door of a mausoleum. "I grant this small boon to you as a gesture of my good faith." With that, he reached out and gave the back of Sherry's gloved right hand a light tap with one long, thin finger.

Sherry gave a startled gasp as a deep chill penetrated her skin all the way to the bone, as if she had suddenly plunged her hand into a bucket of ice water.

"Remove your glove," the gray man said. "Go ahead. See for yourself."

Sherry hesitated, then peeled the black velvet glove. Her breath caught in her throat upon seeing the scarred and twisted claw that had up, until a moment ago, been her right hand replaced by perfectly normal unburned flesh. As she stared at her repaired fingers, opening and closing them without pain for the first time in

months, tears began to stream from her eyes, although the masque covering her ruined face remained as impassive as before.

"Help me with my task, my dear, and reclaim that which was yours: your beauty, your career, your very life itself," the gray man said, his deep bass voice filling her ears like the pulse of her own heart. "Deny me, and you face poverty, degradation and humiliation; a miserable existence you will be helpless to escape, for I will insure that no disease, no accident, no weapon shall shorten your suffering. You shall live to be a very old, very wretched creature indeed. But serve me, and you shall reclaim your rightful place as one of the world's greatest models, and you alone, of those destined to have died that day, will be spared."

As she opened and closed her fist, the icy cold that had permeated her skin and settled in the bones of her right hand traveled up her arm, until it found its way to her heart, which it encased in a layer of hard frost. At first she found the sensation disturbing, but after a moment a comfortable numbness set in.

The eyes that stared out at the world from behind the mask were colder than a glacier. "Who dies first?"

SIX

Chablis, dressed in a pair of tattered DKNY jeans and an oversized Hugo Boss T-shirt, stretched out on the Italian calfskin sofa in front of the plasma TV, the current issue of Vogue in one hand and the remote control for the cable box in the other. She paged through the magazine as she idly scrolled through the cable box's menu, looking for E! or the Fashion Channel.

She wasn't sure exactly where to find them because the cable box did not belong to her. Neither did the magazine, plasma TV or the sofa. In fact, the only things that did belong to her in the converted warehouse loft apartment she currently called home were her clothes, make-up and hair care products. Everything else, including the apartment itself, belonged to Leonide, her current boyfriend.

Leonide, like all of Chablis's previous paramours, was a photographer. He worked for both commercial and high fashion clients, although he had yet to establish himself as a name in the business. He was currently working on a portfolio he hoped would catapult him into the big leagues, utilizing Chablis as his model. Which suited her just fine.

Since coming to New York City to start her career as a professional model two years before, the bewitching platinum blonde beauty had not paid rent or a single utility bill. Indeed, she didn't even own anything she couldn't throw inside a suitcase, much less any furniture or major appliances.

And why should she?

She constantly had to jet here for a weekend or jet there for a week. What was the point of paying rent on a place to keep her clothes when she could just as easily bring them along with her? And why pay for headshots and portfolios when she could just as easily get them for free? Well, almost free.

She saw the relationship between herself and her ever-changing string of admirers as symbiotic. They provided her with a place to live and free eight-by-tens, and she made herself available to them—both artistically and sexually. Often, the sex was secondary to the

more dedicated artists. After all, any woman could provide them with a blowjob, but a readily accessible photogenic subject capable of taking direction was something else all together.

She preferred to see herself not as jaded for her tender years—after all, she wouldn't turn nineteen for two more months—but as savvy.

She'd hardly been a blushing virgin when she stepped off the bus at Port Authority. Her mother was a cocktail waitress in Oklahoma City, her father some fair-haired cracker she'd taken a shine to around closing time late one night. That chance shuffling of genetic material had resulted in a baby girl of remarkable cuteness, who then grew up to be a little girl of exceptional prettiness, who later blossomed in a young woman of outstanding loveliness. One that, at the age of fifteen, caught the eye of one of Merlot's talent scouts while trying out for the Miss Model America Pageant in Tulsa.

With her natural platinum blonde locks, curvy figure, sparkling blue eyes and saucy schoolgirl demeanor, Chablis had what it took to be the next Marilyn Monroe. It didn't take much talking from the talent scout for her to decide to leave the trailer parks of her birth, change her name from Ruby to Chablis, and put her tawdry past behind her. Every month or so she sent a check to her mother, who was often too addled by gin to notice or care that her only daughter had changed her name and moved over a thousand miles away.

At that particular moment, Leonide was out of town on a shoot for *Sports Illustrated*, leaving Chablis alone to her own devices. Well, almost. Chablis's one duty, while Leonide was away, was to take care of Tweak, an unaltered, male short-haired tabby whose primary hobby seemed to be coughing up hairballs on her clothes and spraying anything that even vaguely looked like it might belong to her with his own unique blend of cat stink.

Chablis hated Tweak and she was fairly certain Tweak felt the same way about her. Personally, she couldn't understand why someone would want to keep a pet, especially one that crapped in a box you keep inside your home. It just seemed like a great deal of hassle and responsibility for something that didn't do anything to help your career or pay your bills. But until she lost interest in

Leonide and found herself a new camera jockey to play muse to, she was resigned to cohabiting with the spiteful ball of fur.

Her channel surfing was abruptly interrupted by the buzz of the front door bell. Muttering under her breath, she got to her feet and strode across the hardwood floors of the Tribeca loft space. Tweak leapt from his perch atop his three-storey kitty condo in hot pursuit, doing his best to put himself between her feet and the floor with every step.

"Get out from underfoot, you stupid cat," she spat, aiming a sandaled foot at the tabby.

Tweak responded by arching his back and spitting back before darting under a nearby easy chair.

"Fucking cat."

The buzzer sounded a second time as she reached the door. Muttering under her breath about unannounced visitors, she leaned forward and placed her eye to the peephole. She was surprised to see a woman standing on the other side, her back to the door, her head covered with a silk scarf, and dressed in a black and white floral print cotton Burberry jacket. Although Chablis could not see the unknown caller's face, she could tell that the woman was carrying a large cardboard box.

"Who is it?" she asked curtly, punching the intercom speaker button installed next to the door, adding: "Leonide's not here."

"I'm not here to see Leonide," the other woman stated, turning to face the door. "I'm here to see you, Chablis."

Chablis blinked, amazed to find herself staring through the fisheye lens of the peephole into Sherry's face, somehow miraculously restored to its former beauty. She closed her eyes for a moment, shook her head, and looked again. This time she could tell what she was looking at, but the shock from the initial illusion still had her heart racing.

"Jesus, Sherry!" she said, unlocking the door. "You really gave me a start! Hurry up and come in, before that lousy cat of Leonide's tries and makes a break for the hallway."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you," the former model said as she entered the apartment. "That's why I wore the mask in the first

place."

"It's not that," Chablis said with a nervous laugh. "It's just... Well, for a moment there, you looked... you looked..." She let the sentence trail off awkwardly .

"Like I used to?"

"Uh, yeah."

When Sherry was inside the apartment and in more direct light, it was obvious she was wearing a mask, but Chablis had to admit that with the proper lighting, the likeness was good enough to fool even someone as familiar with Sherry's face as herself.

"In case you're wondering why I decided to stop by like this," Sherry said, her voice contrite. "I wanted to apologize for my behavior the other day. It was uncalled for. I never should have lashed out at you and the others like that."

"Yeah, well, I guess you were upset," Chablis said with a shrug. "Say, you want to put that box down?" She motioned to the chrome and glass coffee table situated in front of the sofa.

As she watched her friend walk over and placed the cardboard box she was carrying in her gloved hands onto the table, a sudden thought made Chablis frown.

"Uh, Sherry, how did you know where to find me? I've only been hooked up with Leonide since a month ago."

"I called your new agency, explained who I was, and they gave me your contact info."

Mollified, the cloud passed from Chablis's brow, leaving it as smooth as butter. "What's in the box?" she asked.

"Like I said, I am really embarrassed by how I reacted the other day. I want to try and make it up to you. I've been going through my wardrobe, deciding what things to get rid of and what to keep. I thought you might want some of these. They're mostly cocktail dresses and evening gowns. Stuff I'll never have any reason to wear ever again."

Chablis lifted an eyebrow. She never passed up a chance to add to her wardrobe, even if it meant having a hand-me-down altered. "Like what?"

"There's a red halter evening dress by Valentino. A pewter, leather jacket by Donna Karan. An Armani Prive, black silk jersey backless gown, with crystal bead embroidery."

"Ooh, stop! You had me at hello," Chablis said with a giggle, rubbing her hands together in anticipation. "Apology accepted. Have a seat while I find something to open the seal on that box."

As Chablis busied herself with locating a knife, Sherry glanced around the converted loft, taking in the exposed brick walls, the ultra-modern kitchen island and, in particular, the half-bath Leonide had converted into a dark room.

"Ah-ha! Here we go." Chablis trotted back from the kitchen area, clutching a six-inch steak knife. She sat down on the sofa beside Sherry and slid the sharp edge of the blade along the tape sealing the top of the box. Sherry gave a heavy sigh, causing Chablis to momentarily stop what she was doing and glance over at her.

"What is it?"

"I have to admit losing my looks was devastating to me. I thought it was the end of my world. I would look at you and my other friends, and become angry thinking about what I lost. It made me resentful and bitter. I hated anyone who looked better than me. And, lets face it, that pretty much left me hating everybody. But last night, after I chased all of you out of my apartment, I finally hit rock bottom. And I hit it hard. I tried to kill myself. I tried to hang myself. But I failed. As I lay there, still alive after wanting so badly to die, it came to me that what I truly needed wasn't to have my looks back, but to have a purpose in life."

"Oh, crap. You're not going to start telling me about Jesus now, are you?" Chablis asked uneasily.

"No, nothing like that!" Sherry said with a laugh. "All my life, ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to be a model and be part of the fashion industry. Well, now that I can no longer work in front of the camera, maybe I can find a place behind it."

"So, you want to be a photographer?" Chablis frowned, not sure if she was entirely certain where Sherry was going with her little confession about suicide attempts and hating her friends for being prettier than her.

"Exactly! I mean, I know what a photographer needs and wants out of a model. I know what the clients are looking for. I know what looks good and doesn't look good on certain body types. I'm a natural, once you think about it. I just need someone to teach me the basics; you know, help get me started. Show me how to set up a dark room and do my own developing, that kind of stuff. Then I can build a portfolio of my own."

"Yeah, well, it's definitely an idea," Chablis said half-heartedly, shifting about uncomfortably.

"Do you think you could talk to your boyfriend? See if he's willing to help me? He's got a home darkroom set up and everything."

"I dunno, Sherry. Leonide and I, well, we haven't been together all that long. And he's really busy right now. That's why he's not here. Why don't you ask Gunter? I mean, you're tight with Cabby, right?"

"Gunter's preoccupied with getting ready for the baby. Once he's a new dad, he won't have much time for side projects. Besides, he and I never really got along. You know that."

"Yeah, that's true."

"So, will you ask your boyfriend—Leonide, isn't it?"

"I'll ask, but I can't promise you he'll say yes. Like I said, he's a busy guy. Real busy. And the dark room's kinda small. There's just enough room for one person in there."

"Well, there's no harm in asking, is there?"

"No. I guess not," Chablis said, sounding like a child who has just been told that she can't have her dessert until she's finished eating her Brussels sprouts. As she peeled away the last of the tape sealing the cardboard box, the scowl on her face was replaced by a look of delight. "Omigawd!" she squealed, pulling out the first article of clothing, a taupe Vera Wang slip dress with tulle overlay and sequined waist. "Sherry—this is gorgeous!"

His previous caution forgotten, Tweak crept out from under the sofa and hopped up onto the coffee table, rubbing the side of his face against a corner of the cardboard box.

"Hey, get away from that!" Chablis snapped, making a "shoo" motion with one of her hands. "Don't you even think about marking that box, you mangy bastard."

However, Tweak refused to be frightened off. Instead of scurrying away, he stood up on his hind legs, propping his front paws against the side of the box, and peered intently down into its interior, his tail switching back and forth like a furry pendulum.

"Did you not hear me, you stupid fuzz ball?" Chablis gritted between her teeth. "Do I need to get the spray bottle?"

The loosely packed clothes inside the open box seemed to twitch and there was a dry, scrambling noise, like that of tiny claws against cardboard, and suddenly a tiny mouse the color of a storm cloud poked its head out.

Chablis and Sherry each gave a little scream and jumped back from the coffee table. The mouse responded by leaping out of the box and onto the coffee table.

"It's a mouse!" Chablis squealed. "What's a fucking mouse doing in a box of clothes?"

"I'm so sorry, Chablis!" Sherry said, mortified. "Everything's been boxed up and in storage since the accident!"

"Ewww, gross! Get it, Tweak!" Chablis shouted, her dislike of the tabby suddenly forgotten.

Tweak didn't have to be told twice. The cat launched itself after its prey, tail held high, sending the cardboard box and its contents flying in its wake. The mouse, running for its tiny life, zipped across the open space of the living area, heading directly for the dark room, the door of which was standing slightly ajar, Tweak in hot pursuit.

Chablis groaned and hurried and hurried after her boyfriend's pet. "Damn you, Tweak, you little asshole. Stay out of there!"

Tweak showed no signs of hearing, much less heeding, Chablis's command as he eeled his way around the doorjamb. The interior of the dark room might have seemed close and cramped to a human, but as far as Tweak was concerned, there was more than enough room to maneuver. The tabby scanned the pitch-black room, sorting through the heavy odor of chemicals in order to locate the scent of his prey. In less than a heartbeat, Tweak spotted the mouse perched on the corner of one of the open shelves lining the walls, where his human owner kept the various chemicals and compounding agents used in the development and printing of photographs.

The tiny gray rodent peered down at the cat on the floor below, its whiskers twitching, and quickly turned tail and began to run, squeezing its furry little body between the wall and the row of bottles and containers lined up on the shelf.

Chablis opened the door of the dark room just in time to see Tweak, eyes still riveted on the mouse, spring up onto the shelf in single-minded pursuit of his prey.

"Tweak, no!" she screamed.

Although the mouse could run along the shelf without disturbing any of the bottles and canisters, the same could not be said for Tweak, who was considerably larger. Several jars fell to the floor, accompanied by the sound of breaking glass.

"Oh, shit!" Chablis said as she clapped a hand over her nose and mouth. Although she may have never graduated from high school, she knew that everything on the shelves surrounding her was highly toxic. She took a step backward, waving her free hand behind her blindly in an attempt to find the switches that controlled the ventilation and light sources in the dark room.

At that exact moment, the mouse Tweak had been so ardently pursuing pulled an about-face, and leapt off the shelf onto the floor, heading back in the direction of the open door. Tweak, still focused on its quarry, leapt down onto the counter space his human owner used to enlarge negatives and develop film, knocking a container of glacial acetic acid, used in making stop baths, onto the floor. Although the solvent was in a plastic container, the force of the impact caused its lid to loosen and its contents to slowly leak out.

All of which went unnoticed by Tweak, who continued to chase after the mouse, his tail held as high and proud as a flag. Chablis screamed and jumped as if she'd been goosed with a cattle prod as the mouse ran over the top of her bare foot. It was all she could do to avoid being knocked off her feet when Tweak ricocheted off her leg and out the door. Already off-balance, she stumbled backward, causing the door to the dark room to slam shut behind her.

Chablis's irritation with the situation transformed into alarm. She turned quickly and, still keeping the lower half of her face covered with one hand, groped for the switch plate in the total darkness. She

gave a small sigh of relief when her fingers closed on a set of plastic switches. She flicked the first one and was rewarded by a red light bulb coming on over her head. Although it was low-wattage, it cast enough illumination for her to make out her surroundings. She then flipped the second switch, which was connected to the ventilation system, and was relieved to hear the telltale whir of the bathroom fan kick in.

Heaving a sigh of relief, Chablis turned the doorknob. She couldn't wait to get her hands on that fucking stupid cat. Hell, if she killed it, she could always blame its death on the damn chemicals the stupid animal knocked over. Sure, Leonide would be upset for a day or two—but it was an accident, right? Her plans of revenge against Tweak ended abruptly when the dark room's doorknob refused to turn.

"Shit!"

She told herself it must have locked itself when she fell against it. She tried rattling the knob harder, but to no avail.

Behind her, unnoticed and unobserved, the ever-expanding puddle of spilled acetic acid came in contact with one of the chemicals knocked onto the floor, which was a bright red crystalline powder. Although Chablis didn't need a chemistry degree to know the various jars and canisters in the dark room were dangerous, she probably would have needed one to know that the bright red powder was potassium ferricyanide, and that when added to solvents such as acetic acid, it releases hydrogen cyanide gas.

"Sherry!" Chablis yelled, banging on the door with her fist. "Sherry! Can you hear me? The door's stuck. Can you open it for me?"

Sherry sat on the couch and stared in the direction of the dark room, gently stroking Tweak, who was curled up on her lap, his eyes half-closed in kitty bliss. Sherry made no motion to get up and go to her friend's aide.

"Sherry, quit jerking off. This is serious!" Chablis hit the door even harder than before. "That stupid cat knocked over a bunch of chemicals. I need to call 911 and get a Hazmat team out here!"

Chablis fell silent and pressed her ear against the door, expecting to hear Sherry's approaching footsteps, but all she could hear was the

hum of the dark room ventilator. Suddenly, there was a loud rattling sound, like that of a bolt coming loose at the most inopportune time possible, and the ventilator fan fell silent as the grave.

"Goddamn it!" Chablis bellowed, delivering as hard a kick to the door as her bare feet would allow. "This *can't* be happening."

She took a step back and glowered at the door as if she could somehow stare a hole through it to the other side. She just needed to stop, gather herself, and take a deep breath and try to figure a way out...

As she sucked in a deep lung full of air to try and calm herself, she suddenly began to cough. It wasn't a mild one, like those used to clear a throat. It was a deep, heavy cough, and its violence took her by surprise. She struggled to take a second breath, but merely succeeded in sucking in a brief gasp of air before a second, even fiercer cough wracked her system, doubling her over at the waist. As she was bent over, she could smell bitter almonds.

However, as she was becoming aware of the telltale sign of cyanide gas, she remained unaware of the spilled acetic acid mixing with another crystallized powder on the floor, this one orange-red in color and called potassium chlorochromate. Within seconds of the solvent making contact, the potassium chlorochromate began to release yellow-green fumes that smelled oddly of pineapples and pepper. The chlorine gas, which was heavier than the surrounding oxygen it was displacing, rose slowly from the floor like a dry ice fog.

"Sherry!" Chablis croaked her throat as raw as ground hamburger. She was hammering on the door with both fists. "Sherry? Can you hear me? Are you there? Help me, please!"

Sherry was still in the apartment and could hear Chablis very clearly as she begged for her life. She paused for a moment as she carefully folded the clothes Chablis had removed and replaced them in the box; her head tilted to one side as she stared at the locked door of the dark room.

There was still time for her to act to save her friend. She could walk across the room and jimmy open the door with the knife Chablis had used to open the box, which was sitting within arm's reach on the coffee table. Or she could simply call 911 and leave the

young model's fate up to the respective speed and efficiency of New York's finest and bravest.

But as these heroic scenarios flashed through her mind's eye, they were followed by far more graphic fantasies of what might befall her should she act to save her friend. Yes, she could jimmy open the door in time to save Chablis and get a lungful of toxic poison gas in the bargain. To endure eternity with the scars of a burn victim was bad enough without adding seared lungs to the equation.

She knew somehow, although she couldn't tell why or how, that if she picked up the phone and tried to call 911, the voice on the other end of the line would be not that of an emergency vehicle dispatcher.

No, better to stick with the deal she had made and profit from it, rather than once again suffer the consequences of interfering with Death's plans.

Chablis dropped to her knees, gasping like a landed fish at the bottom of a boat, before keeling over onto her side. The chorine gas closed over her, wrapping itself around her like a burning blanket, instantly raising painful red blisters around her mouth, eyes and nostrils. The pain was excruciating, as if someone had thrown a bottle of bleach onto her face.

Although she was nearly incapable of breathing, she was far from unconscious. She could not scream or cry out, because her horribly damaged lungs were rapidly filling with liquid. As she struggled to regain her footing, she found her body no longer responded to her commands.

She tried to open her mouth one last time to call for help, but as she did so, her body was seized by a cyanide-triggered convulsion. Chablis's jaws snapped shut like those of a bear trap, clamping her swollen tongue between twin rows of perfectly straight, strong capped teeth.

There was a sensation of excruciating agony, followed immediately by a sudden gushing of warm, salt wetness that filled her mouth and back into her already constricted airways.

The last thing Chablis saw before she succumbed to the darkness crowding the edges of her blurred vision was her own tongue lying on the floor beside her, looking nothing so much as a huge wad of discarded bubble gum.

Chablis had stopped shouting and hammering on the door. Sherry was not sure if she was dead or not, but from the looks of the greenish-yellow smoke oozing out from under the door of the dark room, if the young model wasn't dead yet, it was just a matter of seconds before she would be.

She picked up the box—the only evidence she had ever been in the apartment—and walked hurriedly to the door. Tweak bounded after her, meowing to go out. Sherry paused for a moment, glanced back at the deadly gas oozing its way into the rest of the apartment and opened the door. Tweak scooted past her quickly and ran down the corridor in search of more mice.

"Good for you, kitty," Sherry said as she closed the door behind her.

She walked over and rang for the elevator. The car doors opened instantly, as if it had been patiently awaiting her arrival the whole time. She stepped inside and the doors closed silently behind her without her having to push a button.

As she rode to the lobby, she wondered if she should pull a fire alarm or do something that would call for attention to the poison gas in Leonide's apartment. After all, other people lived in the building. At the very least, the fumes could get into the ventilation system and spread throughout the other apartments on that floor. Innocent people could get sick or die. Not that Chablis was guilty, exactly. It was just that she was the only one who *had* to die, as far as she was concerned.

As Sherry wondered what she should do, her right arm suddenly felt as if it had been thrust up to the shoulder into an ice-choked river in the middle of February. The shock was so abrupt and so severe; she gasped aloud and dropped the box she was carrying.

With trembling fingers, she removed the Burberry jacket she was wearing and stared in mute amazement at the smooth, unblemished skin that covered her arm from wrist to shoulder blade. Hesitantly,

she lifted her hand toward the elevator's ceiling, expecting her reach to be curtailed by the constriction scar tissue that had, up until a moment ago, formed a painful webbing between her upper arm and her ribcage, but, instead, she found herself able to extend her arm to its full length without shrieking in tortured agony for the first time since the accident.

When the elevator doors opened onto the lobby a few moments later, Sherry hurried out, making sure to keep her head down and her face averted from possible witnesses, all thoughts of warning the other tenants in the building forgotten.

SEVEN

It was ten o'clock in the morning inside Sound Stage A at Loving Cup Studios, in beautiful downtown Hoboken, and Shiraz was sitting in the stylist's chair, trying her best to tune out the chaos that surrounded her as she read the latest issue of *Essence*. She was already outfitted in her wardrobe for the day's shoot: a Baby Phat, ruffled flower halter halter dress in citrus yellow acetate/spandex blend, with rouched insets along the snug bodice; matching fabric, floral appliqué with crystal rhinestone center at the front left corner; a raw-edged, asymmetrically-cut hemline, which hit just below her knees; and a pair of cork wedge sandals.

She much preferred straight-up glamour magazine editorials or advertising shoots to music videos such as this, but she couldn't afford to turn her nose up at any work, especially since Merlot was no longer around to help her out.

Before the accident in Florida, Shiraz had benefited from being with a comparatively small but prestigious agency, one owned by one of the industry's best-known faces. And she had also benefited from being of one Merlot's chosen few; her beloved "Cellar" as she was fond of calling them.

She was with a much larger, equally prestigious firm, but in danger of getting lost in the shuffle. She had to earn for them in order to prove herself a wise investment on their part. And that meant taking every gig they handed her.

Including rap videos.

This particular video was for a track from the new album *Pimpin B Hard*, by the rap artist Mandrake. The director, a short, scrubby white boy just out of NYU Film School, envisioned Shiraz's character as a cross between a hootchie mama, a refugee from the stage version of *The Lion King*, and *Lady Godiva*.

Shiraz was supposed to represent Medusa, or some such shit, and there was going to be one scene where she would use her super-long braids like a spider's web and another one where they would grab Mandrake like an octopus's tentacles. The director had gone on and

on about how her hair would symbolize how women use their sexuality to lure and trap men. But judging from the sweat on the dude's upper lip and the way he'd twitch whenever he started talking about the braids, Shiraz figured he was a freak for hair and left it at that.

In any case, the director's "vision" required that she have insanely long braided hair extensions woven into her natural hair. They were so long in fact, that they touched the ground. Luckily, they were mostly composed of synthetics, but they were still extremely cumbersome. She had been sitting on a canvas chair for four and a half hours, while the hairdresser and his assistant turned her head into a spider's web or some such silliness. It didn't really matter that much to Shiraz what they did or didn't do to her person. She had spent her entire adult life, and much of her childhood, allowing others to express themselves through her hair, clothes, make-up and body posture.

"Yo, beautiful!"

Shiraz glanced up from her magazine at the tall, well-built black man sauntering toward her. He was dressed in an exaggerated pimp costume, circa the early Seventies, complete with a floor-length hot pink crushed velour swing coat with dyed fuchsia marabou feather trim on the cuffs, hem and collar; a pair of lime green and lemon yellow paisley polyester pants; six inch, fire engine red stack heel polyurethane boots; a faux-leopard fur hat with a brim wide enough to land a plane on; wrap-around, gold and diamond crusted Missoni sunglasses; and a walking cane capped by an eight ball stolen from someone's pool table. He was shirtless, and with every step he took the velour overcoat swung open to reveal his hairless, well-defined chest and chiseled sixpack abdomen.

"Hey, Mandrake," she said, offering him a smile that was friendly without being familiar.

The rap star's eyes, shaded behind the expensive sunglasses, took inventory of the lines and curves of her body, then grinned, revealing a mouthful of custom gold. "You make one hella milkshake, my fizzle. How bout you an' me roll outta this joint in my 'slade fo' some Cristol when we done?"

Shiraz smiled, her eyes seeming to sparkle in anticipation. "Fo shizzle, my nizzle."

Mandrake's grin widened. Despite his get-up and the grill in his mouth, he reminded her of a little boy who had got what he wanted for Christmas.

"Mandrake!" the director yelled from the other side of the sound stage. "We need you on the set!"

Mandrake nodded his acknowledgement and turned to leave. Before he left he looked back over his shoulder at Shiraz. "Catch ya later, aight?"

"Aight," she replied, nodding her head in agreement.

Shiraz let out a sigh as Mandrake swaggered back over the set. She had no intention of going to dinner with him, but she had learned a long time ago that it wasn't politic to tell performers "no". It was far easier to simply duck out when they weren't looking.

Not that Mandrake could tell the difference between her and any of the other dancers, background extras, or even the production assistants that filled the sound studio where they were shooting his video. Everything with tits and an ass was fair game as far as a player like him was concerned. Her mama had taught her better than to hook up with someone like that, and so had her daddy.

And that was Shiraz's problem.

To be blunt, she wasn't comfortable around men like Mandrake. All they had in common was the color of her skin, and precious little else. The walk-in closet in the bedroom she had as a teenager was bigger than the apartment he'd grown up in. Despite her carefully crafted persona in the fashion press as a sassy, soulful sistah, Shiraz was more princess than fly girl, and always had been.

Born Shirelle Edelstein, she was the daughter of a retired vocalist from a well-known R&B/Soul trio and an orthodontist with an extremely lucrative Beverly Hills practice.

She had attended nursery school with the sons and daughters of movie stars, studio executives, and rock stars. Reared in the lap of luxury and celebrity, she attended the finest schools, and wanted for nothing. Her first car as a teenager was Beamer.

She met Merlot at her parents' twentieth wedding anniversary party. The former model and her mother had known each other since the Sixties, when they met backstage at *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

Shiraz—or Shirelle, rather—was thirteen years old at the time. She was too tall, too skinny, and had braces on her teeth, but Merlot knew a black diamond in the rough when she saw one. She'd taken the awkward, young middle schooler aside, handed her a business card, and told her to give her a call the moment the braces came off. Two years later, she did just that.

Coming from a family with roots in the entertainment industry, her parents did not find the idea of their daughter becoming a model upsetting, especially given the fact an old friend was handling her. The only thing her mother and father had insisted on was that she continued to go to school, so over the next three years she worked as a model during the summer. It wasn't until she graduated and moved to New York City that she took the stage name of Shiraz and finally began to get some real notice.

But that was when she started to realize what was expected from her as a model was different from what was expected from the white girls. Everyone expected her to have a story of coming up from the projects and struggling to prove herself in a predominantly white industry, and were visibly disappointed whenever she talked about spending hours after school shopping Rodeo Drive and body surfing in Malibu.

She talked to Merlot about her situation. The older woman took her under her wing and explained to Shiraz how being a model wasn't just being beautiful and wearing pretty clothes. The trick was to understand what the people looking at you wanted to see, and reflecting it back at them.

In Shiraz's case they wanted to see today's black woman: someone who was proud without being uppity, sassy without being bitchy, earthy without being vulgar, and strong without being threatening. It was a lot to take on, but Shiraz was accustomed to getting what she wanted. And what she wanted was to be a model. So she promptly went to a funky little video store in the East Village and rented an armload of Seventies blaxploitation movies.

Using Tamara Dobson and Pam Grier as her touchstones, she set about crafting a persona that would meet the expectations of others. She did not really think of it as being dishonest. After all, she grew up in a culture where people played at being someone beside themselves for a living. It wasn't like she lied about her background and who she was. She simply did not volunteer any personal information, and, for the most part, very few people bothered to ask.

Over the next four years Shiraz became very good at reflecting back what others wanted to see. And if they wanted to see a girl from the hood made good—well, that was what made them happy and kept her employed. And if she had to be someone other than herself to do that—well, that was showbiz, right?

"Hello, Shiraz."

She glanced up reflexively upon hearing her name. Whoever had spoken was female and standing directly behind her. She looked into the lighted make-up mirror in front of her to see who belonged to the voice. She was startled to see an unnaturally smooth pink face, like that of a painted china doll, hovering just above her right shoulder. She put her hand to her mouth in an attempt to stifle the surprised gasp as she belatedly recognized the approximated features.

"Sherry, is that you?"

The former model nodded her head slightly, causing the mask to bob.

Shiraz turned in her seat to face her friend, a sheepish look on her face. "Sweet Jesus, girlfriend! Sorry I didn't recognize you! I wasn't, um, expecting to see you here."

She took in the other woman's Calypso Christiane Celle lace coco jacket, champagne-colored How & Wen stretch-cotton pants with a chiffon sash, and H Hilfiger braided leather stiletto-heel sandals, while trying not to stare at the web work of red and white scar tissue that extended from Sherry's shoulder and continued up her neck, made visible by her white Vince V-neck cotton tank.

"You look—I mean, you're dressed nice. What are you doing here, girl?"

"I stopped by to talk to Justinian, my old makeup artist. He's working on the next sound stage over. He mentioned that you were

doing a music video over here, so I thought I would stick my head in and see how you were doing. I wanted to apologize for what I said and did the last time I saw you."

"Forget about it, sugar."

"No, I can't. I was an utter bitch. Life's too short to be mad at your friends. And I feel even worse, knowing I'll never be able to make it up to Chablis."

Shiraz gave an exaggerated shiver and pressed one hand flat against her bosom, displaying six inch long lime green acrylic nails. "Oh, God! Wasn't that awful? I still can't believe it!" She sighed heavily as she shook her head back and forth.

"I couldn't bring myself to go to the funeral. I felt like I'd be unwelcome because of what I did the last time we were all together, that is. Did you go?"

"It was nice, I guess. It was a closed casket, of I course."

"Why 'of course'? Was it that bad?"

Shiraz leaned forward, dropping her voice to a stage whisper. "She was bright pink when they found her. Least that's what her boyfriend said. Looked like a cocktail shrimp. Plus there were chemical burns all over her face. And she bit through her tongue before she died. It was like she was drowning on dry land. Ironical, huh? Considering how she could have died that way months ago."

"Yeah," Sherry said, her voice sounding oddly distant. Shiraz couldn't tell if it was because the mask was muffling her mouth or if she was lost in thought. "That's really, uh, post-modern. I read in the paper something about a neighbor returning a cat and noticing a strange smell coming out of the apartment."

"Yeah, lucky thing, I guess. A couple of other people in the building got sick from exposure to the fumes, but no one else died."

"Guess it was just her time," Sherry said, her voice sounding even more distant than before.

"That's a funny thing to say," Shiraz sniffed.

"Sorry," Sherry said with a shrug. "I'm just not good at knowing what to say in these circumstances."

"Let's talk about something else, okay?" While Sherry's fake face remained unreadable, there was something in the way her eyes

glittered in the mask that unnerved Shiraz. "Dead people really bum me out. So, why did you come over to Jersey to talk to Justinian?"

"I wanted to ask him about getting a job as a make-up artist or stylist around here."

Shiraz lifted an elegantly plucked eyebrow in surprise. "You're looking to do hair and makeup?"

"Why not? I can't model anymore. What the hell else am I qualified to do? I need to generate some income. You know how it is. Those hospital bills aren't going to pay themselves, am I right?"

"I hadn't really thought about that," Shiraz admitted. And she honestly hadn't.

It never once occurred to her that Sherry might be in dire economic straits now that she no longer had the means to earn a living as a model. In fact, she had given as little thought to Sherry's predicament as possible. She'd been too busy trying to salvage her own career and establish herself with new agency and new clients to really think about the woman who was responsible for her being alive that very moment.

There was a long, awkward moment, which Sherry broke by complimenting her friend's appearance. "Interesting hairstyle you've got going on there, Shiraz. Very striking."

"You think so?" Shiraz turned back to the mirror and scowled, relieved to have the topic of conversation shifted back to something shallow. "It's a pain in the neck, as far as I'm concerned." She lifted a handful of braids and held them out at arm's length before allowing them to drop. "All this extra weight is pulling my scalp tight. I just hope he gets his shots today so I don't have to sit through this again tomorrow."

"You could always keep it in overnight. That way you don't have to spend four hours in the chair tomorrow."

Shiraz groaned and rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. I'd rather die."

Sherry glanced down at her right wrist, as if checking the time. "Well, I better get going..."

"It was nice seeing you again, Sherry," Shiraz said, trying not to allow her relief that the other woman was leaving to show in her voice. "Keep in touch. Don't be a stranger."

"I won't." Sherry gave a little laugh, which the mask turned hollow. She headed toward the sound stage exit, then turned and waved goodbye to Shiraz. "Besides, something tells me I'll see you again sooner rather than later."

Moments after Sherry departed the stylist who had been working on Shiraz's extensions all morning popped back up and resumed braiding her hair. After a long moment, it was clear her curiosity could no longer be contained. "God, who was that woman wearing the weird Mardi Gras mask?" she blurted, her inquisitiveness getting the better of her.

"That was Sherry."

The stylist's eyes widened. "The Sherry? The one that foresaw the boat exploding?"

"Uh-huh."

The stylist glanced around, making sure no one could overhear her, then leaned in close. "So, does she look gross?"

"Ever see those old *Friday the 13th* movies?"

"Sure."

"She looks just like that guy in the hockey mask."

"Eww!" The stylist gave an exaggerated shudder of disgust.

"I hear you, girl," Shiraz said with a grimace. "It's really hard not to hurl when you're looking at her."

The stylist clucked her tongue and shook her head. "I can't imagine having to be like that."

Shiraz nodded. "If it was me, I'd rather die than go through life looking that way." She gave a little laugh as she looked in the mirror. "You know we're going to burn in hell for this, right?"

The stylist rolled her eyes. "Please. Since I'm going there already, I might as well throw some more wood on the fire."

A twenty year-old student intern from NYU's Film School suddenly appeared at Shiraz's elbow clutching a clipboard in one hand and a go cup of Starbucks coffee in the other.

"Miz, uh, Shiraz?" the production assistant asked uncertainly, double-checking his clipboard. "You're needed on the set."

Shiraz sighed and got to her feet. "Help me with this, will you, sweetie?" she asked, motioning to the mass of braided hair that hung

from her head like a beaded curtain.

"Oh, yeah, sure," the production assistant said with a nervous grin. Shiraz strode toward the set, the intern trailing after her, the coils of hair gathered in his arms like the train on a bridal gown.

"There you are," the director said, beaming ecstatically as she approached. "You look gorgeous, Shiraz. Don't you think so, Mandrake?"

Mandrake nodded and grinned, his grill gleaming even brighter than before under the klieg lights.

"My lady, your chariot awaits." The director bowed at the wait while motioning with an elaborate flourish of his hand.

Sitting before her was the dummy car that the studio's FX department had cobbled together to serve as Mandrake's fictional pimp mobile. It was made of fiberglass and modeled on a 1973 Eldorado convertible, with white vinyl interior and a candy apple red exterior. Although it was up on blocks and lacked an engine, it did have a variable speed motor that turned the wheels via a remote control, causing the twenty-four inch gold-colored hubs to spin.

Mandrake eyed the ornately spiked rims and nodded appreciatively. "They's some phat rims."

"They're not real. We made 'em out of plastic and painted 'em gold. They're modeled on the hubs from the racing chariots in *Ben Hur*." This came from the FX tech, who was controlling the wheels rotation via a remote control device.

"No shit, Sherlock," the rap star said, his voice dripping scorn. "I never would have guessed."

The FX tech's face went red and he quickly moved to the other side of the set to help set up the green screen behind the pimpmobile. Shiraz gave Mandrake a sideways look, wondering if she should reassess her opinion of the man. Perhaps she was not the only person on the set who felt it necessary to pretend to be something other than who she was.

"Okay, let's get things rolling here," the director said, clapping his hands together and rubbing them together in anticipation. "In this scene, Mandrake, you'll be behind the wheel of the car. Shiraz, you'll be in the passenger seat. Mandrake, you'll be turned to face the

camera. You're cruising with your ho, right? You're living large, enjoying the good life, and you want everyone to know that you're a world-class pimp and you're proud, right? You're driving down the street, free and easy, without a worry or care. The sun is shining just for you. You got money, a sweet ride, respect, and fine-ass pussy. It's all good and it's only going to get better, am I right? We'll roll the music from the start, so you can lip synch the entire song from start to finish. Then we'll do it again from a couple of different camera angles. We'll use the green screen to add some suitable backgrounds for you to be driving through in post."

"Such as?"

"The Vegas Strip, South Central during the riots, downtown Baghdad; to give it some edge, that kinda thing."

"Cool."

"Now, as for you, Shiraz, I need you to be sexy and above it all at the same time, right? I want you to pretend you're an African princess, riding through your kingdom in a golden chariot. You know you're beautiful, you know you're hot, you know that men want you, but they can't touch you. Unless they pay for the privilege."

"So you want me to be Nefertiti, Queen of the Hos?"

"I wouldn't phrase it exactly like that," the director said, a little put off by Shiraz cutting to the chase so quickly. "But, yeah, that's kinda what I'm going for here."

Shiraz sighed and reached into the metallic gold strap purse she was carrying and extracted a piece of gum, which she unwrapped and popped into her mouth. She then climbed into the passenger side of the pimpmobile, the seats of which were nowhere near as comfortable of those of a real Eldorado. She could already envision an entire day stuck inside the replica car, doing take after take, smacking gum and pretending to look sexy and aloof while her ass gradually went numb from sitting in one spot for hours on end.

"Bring that wind machine over here!"

Standing four and half feet high, five feet long, and three feet wide, with telescoping legs that allowed for adjustable height, the wind machine looked like nothing more than a powerful four bladed fan mounted inside a huge coffee can, the sides of which funneled and

focused the air stream onto its designated target. One of the FX crew rolled the equipment, which was mounted on sturdy, foot high rubber tires similar to those found on lawn equipment, over to where the director was pointing—just beyond the dummy car's front passenger bumper.

"You sure about that, chief?" the FX technician asked, eyeing the distance between Shiraz and the wind machine. "This thing puts out a lot of air."

"Good. I want those braids to fly out behind her like a magic carpet," the director said enthusiastically.

"Couldn't you do that with CGI?"

"Since when do you have any say as to what gets done on this shoot?" the director snapped, fixing his underling with a cold stare.

"You're the boss," the FX tech said with a shrug.

Satisfied that everything was as he wanted it, the director seated himself in his chair next to the cameraman.

"Okay. Cue lights, cue sound, roll film!"

A production assistant holding a loaded clapper board stepped in front of the camera and snapped it shut, announcing in a loud voice: "This is 'Pimpin' B Hard', scene one, take one."

"And—action," the director shouted. The thumping, thudding bass line of "Pimpin' B Hard" suddenly flooded the soundstage.

Shiraz was too busy trying to look both regal and trashy to pay attention to the words of the song Mandrake was mouthing, but no doubt they concerned the size of his penis, the number of guns he owned, the number of times he'd shot those who got in his way or disrespected him, the amount of bling-bling he wore, the quality of the pussy that surrounded him, and how everyone needed to buy his record.

"Okay! Lookin' good. Give me some wind over there!"

The FX tech nodded and turned the machine on to its lowest setting. The artificially generated breeze stirred the braids hanging from Shiraz's head but did little else.

"Cut! Cut!"

The music came to an abrupt halt as the director jumped out of his seat and moved over to the passenger side of the dummy car,

rubbing his chin as he stared at Shiraz's coil of braids. Suddenly he snapped his fingers and bent over, lifting the braids so that they draped over the back of the front seat.

"There. That should work better. And make sure you're not sitting on any of them, either. Okay. Let's start over from the top. And kick the power up a notch on the wind machine, will you?"

The director seated himself and the clapper loader once more stepped in front of the camera. "'Pimpin' B Hard', scene one, take two."

"Roll film, and—action!"

Shiraz prepared herself for the blast of air striking her face, making sure she did not flinch or squint her eyes against the air stream. As the long synthetic braids woven into her real hair lifted into the air, fanning out behind her like Supergirl's cape, she felt a spark of genuine surprise and empowerment. The director might be a scrubby little white dude with a thing for long hair, but he might just know what he was doing.

"That's it, baby. You're free and unfettered and no one can tell you what to do!" the director called out to her, apparently unaware that being a liberated, pimped-out ho was an oxymoron. Tilt your head back a little bit more, and arch your back! Move it side to side a little bit."

Although all eyes on the set were riveted onto Shiraz and her braids, not a single pair was focused on how the wind machine was blowing the extensions closer and closer toward the spinning trident-shaped rims.

"I want more loft on the braids," the director yelled to the tech manning the wind machine. "Bump it up another notch!"

The tech nodded, adjusting the sped accordingly. The stronger blast of air from the fan made Shiraz's hair snap and flap behind her head like a flag in a stiff breeze. One of the long, loose braids grazed the fast-moving rims and started tangling in them, wrapping themselves around the protruding central hub.

The first thing Shiraz was aware of was a rapid tightening of her scalp that instantly graduated into unbelievable agony. It felt as if someone had grabbed a fistful of her hair and was dragging her into

the back seat by swiftly wrapping the braids around their fist, which was not far from the truth. The braids, woven into and anchored by her own natural hair, were wound around the hub, reeling in her head with such force that it smashed against the back of the pimpmobile's fiberglass seat.

Shiraz screamed as the searing pain in her scalp grew worse. She could feel the skin just above her brow ridge starting to tear. For a split second she had a vision of herself breaking open an orange by pulling back the rind. But instead of orange juice, blood was pouring from the fruit, staining her hands a deep, dark crimson.

She could hear someone screaming as if they were being skinned alive, and it took her a second to realize the person shrieking was herself. She desperately wanted to shut her eyes and hide from what was happening to her, but the skin of her face was pulled so tight it was impossible for her to blink, much less close her eyelids.

Somebody yelled: "She's caught in the wheels!"

"Turn it off! Turn it off!" the director shouted, his voice sounding like that of a panicked kid.

The FX engineer fumbled with the remote control that operated the motor that spun the axle on the dummy car, his eyes bulging from their sockets like a pair of hardboiled eggs. Mercifully, the wheels came to a halt, but not before Shiraz's scalp began to pull itself free of its mooring with a sickening, wet popping noise.

Within an instant, a blanket of blood covered her head, gushing from the top of her skull in all directions. Mandrake gave an oddly girlish scream then turned and vomited over the side of the car as blood squirted out of the top of Shiraz's head and splashed him in the face.

Shiraz reached up with her hand and found all of her head and hair was soaked with thick, warm blood. She could tell that the skin and hair that had previously covered her forehead was now rolled up like a discarded carpet in the middle of her head, leaving the subcutaneous layers of muscle and bone of her skull completely exposed.

She instinctively grabbed Mandrake's arm with her left hand, digging her fingers so deep into the flesh of his forearm her fake nails

snapped off. The rap star yowled in pain and, without thinking, turned and punched her in the mouth.

"Ow, bitch! Leggo my arm!"

Shiraz barely felt the blow and could not hear Mandrake cursing at her because the blood from the massive U-shaped laceration exposing her skull was pouring directly into her ears.

The director was running back and forth, shouting orders to whoever was closest. "Call 911! Get an ambulance! Someone find some scissors and cut her loose!"

As he desperately attempted to restore some kind of order to the set, his own mind kept racing in frantic circles. How could this have happened? This was his chance, his shot at the big time. Now it was swirling down the drain right before his eyes. God, he was going to be so sued. Disfiguring a popular fashion model, that wasn't going to come cheap. This was almost as bad as the thing with Landis and the Vietnamese kids on the set of *The Twilight Zone* movie. Landis's career had never truly recovered after that. And he didn't even have that much of a career to recover, so where did that leave him? Fucked, that's where. There had to be someone, anyone to blame for this, because he was damned if he was going to take the fall alone.

As he scanned the surrounding crew, his gaze fell upon the FX engineer, who was urgently digging through his toolbox. The remote control for the dummy car was sitting on the workbench right at his elbow.

"You!" The director shouted, stabbing an angry finger at the hapless crewmember.

The FX engineer halted his search and stared up at the director, bafflement replacing the look of sick horror on his face.

"You're the one who built that monstrosity!" The director bellowed, going red in the face. "Why didn't you install a safety mechanism to keep her hair from getting caught in the damn rims?"

The FX engineer held up one hand, hoping to silence the director's tirade for the time being. "Look man, this can wait for later. I'm trying to find something to cut her free of the wheels."

"This is your entire fault!"

"Bullshit! You're the asshole who came up with the hair idea at the last minute!"

The blotches discoloring the director's face went from lobster red to nova white. "You take that back, you fucking son of a bitch!" he shrieked, shoving the FX engineer as hard as he could.

The FX engineer stumbled backward, hitting the workbench hard enough to send the remote control and the toolbox next to it crashing to the floor.

The remote control struck the ground first, landing in such a way that both the on/off button and the mechanism controlling the axle speed made contact with the floor, not only turning the wheels back on, but at high speed. This was followed instantly by the box full of heavy tools crashing down on top of the remote control device, smashing it to bits.

Shiraz was starting to feel dizzy and a little faint. Not surprising, given that she had lost a pint of blood in less than five minutes. She realized she was going into shock. She was vaguely aware that Mandrake had bailed out of the front seat of the dummy pimpmobile, and she could hear someone—she thought it might be the PA who helped carry her braids—asking her if she was okay and telling her they'd called 911 and that help was on the way. She could also hear someone arguing in the background. It sounded like the director. His voice was loud, angry and scared.

There was a whirring noise, which Shiraz recognized as the sound of the axles underneath the car turning, and the pain was back, this time even worse than before. There was a loud cracking sound, like someone snapping a large stalk of celery in two, and, suddenly, the pain was gone as if it had never existed. At first Shiraz was too relieved to be anything but thankful, and she realized that she was no longer staring up at the soundstage rafters, but looking into the back seat of the dummy car. While that was, in and of itself, peculiar, what was even stranger was that someone was sitting in the back seat, looking back at her.

That someone was an older African-American man with salt and pepper temples, dressed in an impeccable charcoal-gray three-piece

suit. A walking stick with an ebony shaft and sterling silver head shaped like a skull rested across his knees.

"Hello, my dear," the gray man said, smiling like a playing card joker. "I've been waiting for you."

The director and FX engineer stared at the smashed remote control that lay on the floor between their feet. The FX engineer pulled himself away from the director's suddenly lax grip and dashed toward the dummy car.

"Kill the juice! Kill the juice!" he screamed at the electrician.

The lights on the set flickered as the cables connecting the dummy car to its power supply were abruptly shut down.

The director shook himself free of his state of shock and hurried to where the others were gathered. Before he could ask if she was okay, Mandrake spun on his towering stack heels and vomited yet again.

Shiraz was still facing forward in the front seat of the dummy car. Or at least her body was. Her head, however, pulled by the braids ensnared in the speeding rims, was turned one hundred and eighty degrees on her neck, so that she was looking directly into the back seat. Her face was already a mask of gore: fresh blood, mixed with spinal fluid, trickled from her nose, eyes sockets and ears. But most horrible of all was the realization that she wasn't yet dead.

The director watched in mute horror as Shiraz's eyes flickered in his direction, then seemed to fix on something beyond him, before finally losing their luster and becoming a cloudy gray.

He wondered what she had seen in those last few, fleeting seconds of life, but judging from the look on her face as Death claimed her, perhaps he was better off not knowing.

Sherry rode in the PATH train back to Manhattan in silence, pretending to look out the window at the passing scenery when in reality she was staring at the reflection of her mask in the glass.

In the past she would have taken a taxi or a limo out to the studio, but her funds were far more limited since she was no longer working as a model. Such extravagances were a thing of the past now. She had to be satisfied that it was after rush hour and that the train into the city was sparsely populated. Not that anyone would have voluntarily seated themselves beside her. In some ways being a hideously scarred freak had its advantages; such as being left the hell alone on the subway.

Just as the train entered the lengthy tunnel that ran under the Hudson River from Jersey to New York, Sherry felt a stab of cold shoot through her right shoulder, as if someone had thrust a knitting needle made of ice through her collarbone. She leaned forward in her seat, turning so that her body faced away from the aisle. She could feel the scar tissue melting away, reshaping itself into healthy, unmarred skin.

She did not allow herself to think about what the healing of her wounds meant for Shiraz. She wanted to savor the moment, not ruin it by thinking about someone beside herself. If she didn't take care of herself, who else was going to? Certainly none of the fair-weather friends who had left her to rot in a hospital room and did nothing to help her with her financial troubles. Soon she would not have to worry about anything at all. And all her so-called friends would be beyond worrying as well.

EIGHT

Cabernet, Gunter and Chardonnay stood in a tight knot in the foyer of the funeral home. Cabernet checked her Cartier watch for the fifth time in as many minutes.

"Where could they possibly be?" she whispered to Gunter. "I wonder what's keeping them?"

Chardonnay rolled her eyes. "They're probably too busy screwing to keep an eye on the time."

Gunter nodded. "Chard's right. Brut and Rose are hardly the most responsible people on the face of the earth."

Cabernet shook her head in disgust. "I always *knew* Brut was a dog, but I at least expected better from him than what he's done to Sherry. I mean, they were together for almost two years. And he dumps her while she's in the hospital? He doesn't even have to decency to visit her even once while she's recuperating, much less let her know he's seeing someone else."

"If he's such an asshole, why bother waiting for him?" Gunter sighed.

"I don't expect you to really understand, honey. It's just that we were, you know... Merlot's Cellar. Even though she's gone, and we're all with other agencies, I'd like to believe there is still a bond between us. We're family."

"Better than that, if you ask me," Chardonnay said with a sniff, rubbing the bottom of her nostrils briskly with her folded index finger.

Cabernet gave her a sharp look. "You didn't toot some coke in the cab on the way here, did you?"

"No, of course not," Chardonnay exclaimed, trying to hide the lie in her eyes with an offended tone of voice. "Besides, even if I *did*, which is not an admission of guilt, mind you, what difference would it make to Shiraz now?"

"It's just a matter of respect to her family, Chard," Cabernet replied. She turned and shook her head, weary of having to explain the obvious to the oblivious.

The front door of the funeral home opened and a rush of street noise entered the otherwise muted atmosphere, followed by Brut and Rose. Brut's head was lowered as Rose was whispering in his ear.

"We'll have to try that out sometime," he said with a grin. Rose giggled into her hand. Brut glanced up and saw the others gathered in the foyer, watching him. His wolfish grin quickly turned sheepish.

"Uh, hiya guys. Sorry we're late." He stepped forward and took Gunter's hand and shook it. "Hey, dude. We really gotta stop meeting like this."

"This isn't a cocktail party, Brut," Cabernet snapped. "One of our friends is dead."

Brut colored slightly and dropped his eyes to the carpet, playing the chastised man-boy for all it was worth. "Sorry, Cabby. It's just that I'm not used to, you know, going to so many funerals in such a short period of time."

Chardonnay nodded her head. "Same here. First Chablis, now Shiraz—and in less than a week."

"And what's with the speedy funeral?" Rose asked. "I mean, Shiraz was killed only yesterday. Isn't this a little quick?"

"I don't know why they're holding the funeral here and not flying her back out to the West Coast," Cabernet replied. "All I know is that her parents flew out from LAX within hours of getting the news."

"They flew out at a moment's notice?" Rose had a perplexed look on her face. "How could they have afforded something like that?"

"I dunno," Chardonnay said. "Maybe the record label paid for it? Mandrake's people have to be desperate to avoid a lawsuit."

"Good luck on that," Rose said. "Those fuckers are so sued."

The other four nodded their heads in mute agreement of Rose's statement.

Cabernet looked around and checked her watch yet again, a look of concern on her face.

"Everyone's here now," Gunter said, trying to hide his impatience. "Let's get this over with, okay?"

"Sherry's not here," Cabernet said solemnly.

Brut shifted about, suddenly uncomfortable in his Armani suit. "Sherry's going to be here?"

"I called her and told her about Shiraz," Cabernet explained. "She said she would try and make it."

"I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for her to show up," Rose said dismissively. "I mean, what with the way she looks and the things she said to us at the party, she'd be better off not showing her face—or what's left of it—around here."

Cabernet's eyes narrowed to gun slits as she compressed her lips into a tight, bloodless line. Gunter knew the look on his lover's face all too well and quickly put himself between the two models.

"If Sherry was going make the service, she would be here by now," he said, taking Cabernet's elbow and steering her toward the hallway that lead to the viewing parlors. "Let's all go in and pay our respects to her family."

Cabernet sighed heavily, but nodded her agreement.

"Hey, you guys are you sure this is the right funeral home?" Brut asked. He was peering at a small metal and plastic sign set up in front of one of the viewing rooms, the type with small white removable plastic letters. "It says the person inside is Shirelle Edelstein, not Shiraz."

Cabernet frowned. "I know Shirelle was her real name, because Merlot called her that by accident, once. But I don't know about the Edelstein part."

"There's only one way of finding out," Chardonnay said.

She stepped forward and opened the door wide enough to look inside while remaining in the hall. From where she stood, she could see that the viewing parlor was not very large, and the number of flower arrangements made it seem even smaller. A double row of chairs was arranged between the door and a simple casket resting atop a church truck, three sides of which were covered by a burgundy, crushed velvet drape.

Seated on the front row, facing the open casket, were three figures, two male and one female. One man was dressed in a dark suit, with a black yarmulke resting atop his balding head and a prayer shawl draped about his shoulders. He was rocking slightly back and forth, reciting a prayer in what sounded like Hebrew. The second male was taller, and dressed in a much nicer dark suit than the first, but also

wore a yarmulke, and held the hand of the weeping African-American woman sitting beside him.

"Excuse me—may I be of some service?"

Chardonnay stifled a yelp of surprise at the funeral director's sudden appearance at her elbow. She pressed the flat of her hand against the top of her breast and could feel her heart hammering away at her ribs at full force.

"Watch out how you sneak up on people, buddy," she said, rolling her eyes. "You almost got yourself a new customer, scaring me like that."

"I'm sorry, young lady. I did not mean to frighten you." The funeral director was an older African-American man with a long face and a receding hairline, the temples of which were liberally streaked with gray. He wore a charcoal gray suit and spoke with a deeply cultured voice that was as smooth and silky as Bailey's Cream on the rocks—and about as warm. "You people are here for the Edelstein funeral?"

"If you mean Shiraz, yeah," Chardonnay replied.

"Ah." The funeral director's eyes widened slightly and he nodded his head. "You must be the others."

"Other what?" Brut said, lifting an eyebrow.

"Models. I was informed by the Edelsteins that their daughter was involved in that line of business." The funeral director stepped forward and opened the door to the parlor for them. "Please, come inside."

The five of them stepped inside the parlor, moving with the trepidation of deer coming down to a creek to drink. Upon hearing their approach, the older couple sitting before the casket turned to look at them quizzically.

Cabernet took the initiative and stepped forward, extending her hand in greeting. "Mr and Mrs Edelstein? I'm so sorry for your loss. My name is..."

Mrs Edelstein daubed at her eyes then smiled in recognition. "You're Cabby. Shirelle told me you were expecting."

Cabernet returned the other woman's smile and nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Shiraz's mother stood up aided by her husband, who kept a solicitous hand on her elbow the whole time. She looked to be in her late fifties, early sixties, and resembled a slightly older, slightly thicker version of her daughter. "My name is Shirley. This is my husband, Dr Howard Edelstein."

"Sir," Cabernet said, shaking his proffered hand. "I can't begin to tell you how much Shiraz—I mean, Shirelle—meant to all of us."

"It's okay," Dr Edelstein said with a wan smile. "You can call her Shiraz. That's who you knew her as."

"Would you like to see her?" Mrs Edelstein asked.

Cabernet nodded and Shiraz's mother motioned to the open casket. Cabernet turned to Gunter and gave his hand a squeeze. He nodded and stepped over to her left, taking her elbow in his hand. Together, they moved up to view the body of their friend who, less than forty-eight hours ago, had been alive and well and part of their world.

Cabernet looked into the casket and gave a short gasp of surprise before putting her hand over her mouth. The thing in the casket was indeed Shiraz. But she was not the Shiraz as they remembered her: alive, vivacious, and dressed in the teeth of fashion. She was Shiraz as she was then: as lifeless as clay. The morticians had turned her head back around on its broken stalk so that she was not facing forward, and reattached the ten inch wide, U-shaped flap of skin to the rest of her scalp, but had applied absolutely no cosmetics to her dead skin in order to simulate the appearance of life and health. The result was that her face was the shy color of a cold campfire. And instead of being dressed in Hugo Boss or Vera Wang or Louis Vuitton, she was swaddled in a simple linen shroud, which mercifully hid the massive damage to her neck that had taken her life.

Cabernet began to cry, her shoulders shaking from the force of her sobs. Gunter quickly moved her back from the casket. "Come away, Liebling. You're in no condition to handle such things."

Mrs Edelstein stepped forward and placed a hand on Cabernet's shaking shoulders. "Your husband's right, my dear. It means a great deal to Howie and me that you would come to pay your respects, but you shouldn't upset yourself."

The funeral director was suddenly in their company, smiling with the ease of the professionally solicitous. "We provide a withdrawing room for those who are overcome by their grief, if the young lady wishes to make use of it."

"Ja. Danke," Gunter replied.

The funeral director led the couple back into the corridor and down the hallway to a small room outfitted with a settee, a couple of armchairs, and a coffee urn resting on a faux Queen Anne table.

"Help yourselves to coffee, if you like," the funeral director said. "We also have Diet Coke and bottled water available, I believe."

"I'll be okay," Cabernet said, wiping at the tears running down her face with the back of her hand. "I was just not prepared for her looking like *that*."

The funeral director favored Cabernet with a sad smile. "It may seem strange to modern day sensibilities, but the funerary practices of the Jewish faith date back thousands of years. The body of the deceased is dressed in a simple burial shroud to recognize that the distinctions in life between the rich and the poor, the fortunate and the unfortunate, are obliterated in the common end of all mankind.

"To them, fancy clothes and cosmetics are an unhealthy attempt to deny the reality of death and are an improper attempt to glorify a lifeless corpse. Instead, attention is reserved for the spirit, soul, life and influence of the deceased, which was the essence of their humanity—and their divinity."

Chardonnay strode into the room and headed straight for the coffee urn. She poured herself a Styrofoam cup full of scalding hot liquid and turned to fix the funeral director with a sour look. "Tradition, schmadition. It's still gross; I don't care *how* multicultural it is."

The funeral director raised an eyebrow in Chardonnay's direction. "Please excuse me. I have clients I must attend to."

The moment the funeral director was out of the room, Chardonnay gave an over-exaggerated shudder. "That man gives me the creeps. I wouldn't want him pawing my dead body once I'm gone."

Cabernet sighed and shook her head. "Where are Rose and Brut?"

Chardonnay blew at the coffee in the cup, trying to reduce it to a drinkable temperature. "They retired to the smoking lounge. They were pretty grossed out by the whole scene, too. I mean, I've seen my share of dead bodies, y'know? Starting with my dad. But I've never seen one that looked so..."

"Dead?" Cabernet said, finishing her friend's sentence.

"Yeah," Chardonnay agreed, nodding her head. "All the others, they just looked like they were asleep, or something. Take my dad, who died in a car wreck. They fixed him up so he looked just like he did when he was passed out on the couch. But this—this was just wrong. I mean, Shiraz wouldn't have been caught *dead* looking like that."

"And with that, I will go join the others for a smoke," Gunter said, slapping his hands against his knees as he stood up.

He left the room and stood in the hall, hoping to see a sign of some sort that would point in the direction of where he needed to go. Instead of a sign, he spotted a plume of cigarette smoke wafting from a room across the way.

The smoking lounge was more a large alcove, with sand-filled ashtrays stationed every ten feet between folding chairs arranged against the walls. Brut and Rose glanced up from their French cigarettes as Gunter entered. Rose was sitting in one of the chairs, swinging her crossed left leg back and forth, looking alternately bored and uncomfortable.

Gunter removed a package of Gitanes from his breast pocket and knocked one free of the pack, lighting it with a single flip of the Polo lighter Cabernet had given him as a birthday present.

"I guess you'll be smoking a cigar soon, eh, Gunter?" Brut said jokingly.

"Eh?" The photographer frowned for a second. His eyebrows lifted and he smiled as he grasped the meaning behind Brut's comment. "Ah, yes. Any day now, according to her doctor." His eyes dropped to the floor for a moment, then he looked back at Brut.

"I have something I wanted to speak to you about. But I did not want to talk about it in front of Cabby. As you know, she is very close to delivery, and I did not want to alarm her unduly..."

Brut frowned and tilted his head, puzzled by the photographer's solemn tone. "Sup, dude?"

"Do you remember a couple years back? There was a horrible air crash. Flight 180."

"What about it?"

"There was a boy who said he foresaw the plane crashing and talked several of his friends out of getting on the flight."

"Oh, yeah! I remember hearing about that."

"Then, after the crash, the various survivors started dying off, one by one, under strange circumstances. Then, exactly a year later, there was a horrible pile-up on Route 23. Dozens of people were killed."

"Yeah, I remember hearing about that, too." Brut's frown had deepened to the point of being a scowl. "What's the point?"

"I'm not finished yet," Gunter snapped. "Where was I? Oh yes, Route 23. There was a girl who claimed she foresaw the wreck that caused the pile up and blocked an entire line of cars from getting onto the highway. Then, a few days later, the people she saved started to die under bizarre circumstances. *Now* do you get the point?"

Brut stared at Gunter for a long moment, then threw down his lit cigarette, smashing the butt with a stab of his foot. "Bullshit. That crap's an urban myth and you know it. It doesn't have *anything* to do with us, dude."

"Brut, the day the cruise ship blew up—it was the exact same day as the Flight 180 crash and the Route 23 smash-up."

The male model's handsome features went slack. He looked as if the photographer had sucker-punched him in the gut. "Fuck," Brut whispered.

"Baby, what are you two talking about?" Rose asked.

"What we are talking about, my blissfully dumb Rose, is die Todesengel," Gunter said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

"Huh?" Rose looked from Gunter to Brut and back again, searching for a hint as to what they were discussing.

"Rather tall, thin fellow dressed all in black. Carries a sharp farming implement and an hourglass? Does that ring a bell?"

Brut shook his head, a sour look on his face. "Don't listen to him, babe. He's whacked out."

"You young people would do well to pay heed to your friend."

The three of them turned as one to look in the direction of the person who spoke. Standing at the mouth of the alcove was a short, balding man dressed in a dark suit, with a yarmulke resting atop his skull and a prayer shawl draped about his shoulders.

"Who the hell are you?" Brut asked, perturbed by the intrusion into their conversation.

"Please excuse the imposition," the older man said, with a sheepish smile. "My name is Hebel Federman. I am the shomer for Miss Edelstein."

"The what?" Rose tilted her head, a baffled look on her face.

"I am what you might call a watchman. It is my job to keep the dead company until the time of burial, reciting prayers in their name.

Rose seemed even more baffled than she had been before Mr Federman had explained himself. "You get paid to do that?"

"Heavens, no! I am member of a Chevra Kadisha—a special society that helps to observe the proper preparation and rites for the dead of our faith. None of our members are paid. We consider it a mitzvah. An act of kindness."

"Oh. That's nice," Rose said in a tone of voice that suggested she had no idea whatsoever as to what he was talking about.

"So why should we pay attention to this load of bull Gunter's trying to unload on us?" Brut asked.

"I have spent a great deal of time with the dead, young man, more than most living souls ever will. I have spent many long, dark nights alone with nothing but a corpse for company. And something else. Something I could not truly see or hear, but I whom I knew was there, nonetheless. Over the years I have become quite familiar with Death and its ways. And I do not mean just the different ways in which a person can die.

"No, I mean Death as a thing unto itself; a force, as it were. My people call that force Azrael: the Angel of Death. When Azrael spreads forth his wings, their shadow falls upon those marked to die. When I looked upon you and your friends when you came to pay

your respects to Miss Edelstein, I saw that shadow cast upon each and every one of you."

"Fuck this mumbo jumbo bullshit. I've had enough death and dying this week. I don't need any more." Brut turned and grabbed Rose by the hand, all but jerking her out of her chair and onto her feet. "C'mon, Rose. Let's get the hell out of this place!"

"Wait a minute," Rose said, a frown creasing her normally placid features. "Is he saying we're going to die?"

"People say a *lot* of things," Brut snapped in reply, pushing past Gunter and Mr Federman, Rose firmly in tow.

Mr Federman shook his head sadly as he turned to watch the couple hurry out the front door of the funeral home. "I didn't mean to upset anyone. I just wanted to warn you, is all."

"Brut is a very superficial person. But, in all fairness, it is difficult not to be upset when someone tells you they see the shadow of Death cast upon your face," Gunter said.

"There is that," Mr Federman agreed with a little nod.

"You claim that you have come to know something of Death's ways. You said you wanted to warn us."

"So that you would understand what it is you face, and prepare accordingly," Mr Federman said gently. "Better to make your peace while you can, and savor the life that still remains to you."

"Surely you know of some way my friends and I might possibly escape this shadow you see?"

"Escape?" Mr Federman frowned. "My friend, there is no man born who can escape Death. The best one can do is postpone the inevitable."

NINE

Chardonnay stepped outside the funeral home and turned her face up to the fading sky. She had decided to ditch the graveside services following the funeral service in favor of going out somewhere and getting drunk. She was depressed enough as it was without riding out to Brooklyn for the interment in a rented limousine with a bunch of people she barely knew. As it was, Brut and Rose had bailed before the funeral service even began. And judging from Gunter and Cabernet's demeanor, neither one of them were going to be much fun to be around. The buzz from the drugs she'd taken shortly before arriving had long since worn off, and she was in desperate need of refueling.

As tacky as it was, Brut and Rose had probably made the wisest move by splitting when they did. Chardonnay had never been one for religious services, much less religions she knew close to nothing about. Mostly executives from Shiraz's agency had attended the funeral. Plus a handful of editors and photographers and other business acquaintances she'd worked with in her years as a model. There were also a small handful of older recording industry types in attendance, who Chardonnay eventually figured out were friends of Mrs Edelstein, then Cabernet, Gunter and herself. That was about it.

Screw it. She had discharged her duty to Shiraz, assuming she had a duty to begin with. She needed to clear her head of the smell of funeral wreaths and the sound of weeping. But most of all, she wanted to erase the memory of Shiraz's dead face, unpainted and unadorned, from her mind's eye.

She thought about hailing a cab, then decided to give it a pass. She knew a place just down the street called Dolly's. A little walk would do her some good before buckling down for a night of drinking and partying.

As she headed down the street she passed a newspaper vendor stand on the corner. She paused to stare at the stack of tabloid newspapers as the newsy was busy freeing from its baling straps. There was a slightly blurry photograph of Mandrake, dressed in

some ridiculous retro-pimp get up, punching poor Shiraz in the face. The photo had been cropped to hide the gaping wound at the top of her head, but there was still plenty of blood to be seen on her face and Mandrake's clothes. "LATEST RAP STAR SHOCKER" the headlines blared in type usually reserved for presidential elections and moon landings. "MANDRAKE MANHANDLES MUTILATED MODEL".

As she turned away from the sight of her dead friend's final, tortured moments replicated on cheap newsprint, Chardonnay idly wondered who on the music video's crew had been snapping pictures during the shoot, and how much the tabloid paid for that particular gem. She hoped the Edelstein's sued the bastards at the record label for all they were worth. Then she thought about Shiraz's mother seeing the same picture splashed over every paper in the city, and her heart grew heavy in her chest.

In a way, she envied Shiraz. Not being dead. She could have that. No, she envied her for her mother and father. The Edelsteins seemed like very nice, loving, supportive parents. They looked like the type of people who loved their daughter, no matter what she decided to do with her life, how she chose to live it, or who she picked to live it with. To Chardonnay, they seemed like the perfect parents.

And Chardonnay knew a lot about being perfect. Or rather, how hard it was to attain perfection.

Take her own mother, for example. Her mom always wanted her to be perfect. No, scratch that. She didn't *want* her be perfect, she was *expected* to be perfect. She had to walk, talk and behave like the perfect little girl. A perfect little girl who wasn't the one her mother had given birth to, but one that lived somewhere in her mother's head. Of course, this was long before she was Chardonnay. Back then she was simply Darla.

In her child's understanding of the world, she had thought that her mother had given birth to another child—a perfect, golden child—one with long golden hair, peaches and cream skin, and straight white teeth. But someone must have stolen that baby and left her in its place—a poor substitute for the wonder child that was rightfully hers, but one she felt duty bound to shelter and raise. Only when she was

imitating the perfect daughter, the one her mother truly loved, did she feel like she was something less than a disappointment.

One of her earliest memories was of her mother subjecting her to a dye job. She must have been four or five at the time. Perfect little girls have long golden hair, don't you know, and her hair wasn't the right shade of yellow. She could still smell the stench of the home dye kit and how it burned her tender little scalp.

It went wrong, and ended up frying her hair. Of course, somehow that was *her* fault. Her mom had no other recourse than to crop her hair close to her head. For a few blissful months she was allowed to play the tomboy, with a baseball cap covering her shorn locks. Otherwise her mother dressed her like a damn china doll, in frilly dresses that were all pink lace and satin ribbons and made her look like a living birthday cake.

Although Darla wasn't a perfect little girl, she was a good one, and she tried hard, so very, very hard, to be the perfect little girl her mother so desperately needed her to be. Of course, she always failed.

Looking back on it, it was clear that her mother's drive for perfection in her only daughter had everything to do with her marriage being an utter failure. Her father was a handsome man, one with an easy manner and a winning way with the ladies, and women found him irresistible. Trouble was, he knew it—and so did her mom.

Her father whored around on her mother from the day they got back from their honeymoon, and did little to hide the fact from her, or anyone else. Of course, she was pregnant when she married him, so she was chained to him with no going back, at least as far as her family was concerned.

And, to give the devil his due, her dad was a good provider, at least in terms of making sure his family had a roof over their heads, clothes to cover their butts, and food in their bellies. When it came to being a living, breathing, important presence in their lives, especially that of his daughter, he rated less than zero.

Her one real memory of her father was that of him standing in the kitchen door, smelling of whiskey and bar room smoke, arguing with her mother in those angry, hissing tones adults use when they think the kids are asleep and don't want to wake them up. There was

something so virulently unhealthy about that sound. Maybe that's why she preferred shouting and screaming at her lovers.

So her mother was a housewife whose husband screwed around on her and ignored his family in favor of Miller High Life and strange pussy. So she focused all her energy and anxiety onto her child. She needed some kind of validation that her life wasn't a complete and utter disaster, so she decided that her validation would come through absolute strangers declaring her daughter—the only tangible byproduct of her marriage—and her handiwork superior to that of other mothers.

Whenever the judges smiled upon her and placed the tiny tiara on her head and declared her Little Miss Fill In The Blank, then all was good in the world and her mommy loved her. But when the smile was turned to another little face, and the tiara placed atop another tiny head, then she was a horrible, ugly, dreadful child and unworthy not only of her mother's love, but even to be looked upon by decent, God-fearing people.

When she was in eclipse from her mother's affections, she would write little stories, complete with pictures like a storybook, to console herself. The stories were all about the adventures of the little girl with golden hair whose mother was always happy with what she did and whose father loved to watch her sing and dance. But that was all they were: made up stories.

Then, when she was twelve, her father drove his car off the road and into a tree after closing down a local bar. He killed not only himself, but also the young girl who had been riding in the front seat with him. Her mother's immediate response to the tragedy was to start shopping around for another man to support them.

Accustomed to being the primary focus of her mother's attention, twisted as it was, Darla was unprepared to be so rudely cast aside as her mother scrambled to find another provider. A series of boyfriends popped in and out of their lives, all of them a blurred carbon copy of her father.

Angry at being ignored by the only person who had ever meant anything to her, she began to rebel in the only way she knew how: by being imperfect. She started by dying her hair unearthly shades of

pink, green, or purple. Then she started dressing in flannel shirts, torn jeans and Doc Martens.

At thirteen she even went so far as to try and buy a tattoo using a credit card she stole from her mother's purse, but the man who owned the tattoo parlor knew a fake ID when he saw one and reported the card to the bank. Within fifteen minutes of his placing the call, her mother pulled up in the parking lot in her Camry, steam all but pouring from her ears.

It wasn't Darla stealing of the credit card that angered her so much as the fact she had intended to get herself tattooed. Tattoos were something trashy sluts that lived in trailer parks did to themselves, not perfect girls from perfect families with perfect mothers. What was she thinking? And, more importantly, what would the neighbors think once they found out? She was grounded for three months following that incident.

During that period of time, her mother finally found a loser to marry her. He was older than she was, not to mention fat and more than a little gross, but he had money, which seemed to be the important thing as far as her mother was concerned.

On the day of their wedding, Darla stepped inside the ladies room and took a pair of scissors and chopped at her hair until there were patches of scalp visible. She thought it looked pretty cool, to tell the truth, but it definitely didn't fit with the frilly pink and white lace bridesmaid's dress her mother had bought for her. She could still remember the look on the wedding guests' faces as they turned in their pews and saw her walking down the aisle with her freshly butchered hair.

So what do the neighbors think of us *now*, huh, Mom?

The tension that existed between mother and daughter only grew worse after that, and, of course, it was only a matter of a few weeks before she woke up to find her stepfather standing over her bed, drunk, staring at her like she was a choice piece of meat. After that she took to sleeping with a chair wedged under the doorknob of her room.

Shortly before Darla turned fourteen, her mother gave birth to her second child, a son named Jason. Her mother focused the same

obsessive attention on the boy as she had Darla, which was something of a relief. However, it became clear that as far as her mother was concerned, her "real" family consisted of her new husband and child. Darla was an embarrassing failed experiment from a previous life.

As toxic as her mother's love might have been, it was the only affection she'd ever known from the woman. And now that was gone. So she started looking for someone to fill that need for attention. Being a very attractive young girl, it didn't take long for her to find someone willing to do just that.

Her first real love affair was in the eighth grade with a girl named Cynthia. Cynthia was four years her senior, and further along in understanding her sexual identity than she was, but was still closeted and living at home. Still, the experience was a liberating one for her. For the first time in her life she had met someone who seemed to think she was perfect enough as she was. She felt accepted for who she was, not what she *could* be.

Then one day, her mother came from work earlier than usual and walked in on them in bed. She hit the fucking roof, of course. The perfect child of the perfect mother most certainly did not fool around naked with members of their own sex.

Her mother demanded she stop seeing Cynthia, but she had refused, even going so far as to run away to be with her girlfriend on more than one occasion. Then her mother threatened to have Cynthia arrested for statutory rape, and suddenly the one person who seemed to have loved her for herself disappeared from her life.

Enraged at her mother's interference and her lover's betrayal, Darla dived headlong into the only thing left that filled the emptiness inside her: drugs.

Pot, coke, meth, smack, acid, crack, uppers, downers—it made no difference to her, as long as she could smoke it, cop it or shoot it. And there was always the old standby: alcohol, of course.

The final straw came when, at sixteen, she borrowed—some would say stole, but that was a matter of opinion—her disgusting pig of a stepfather's car and went joyriding with some friends. They got

pulled over and the car was searched. Luckily, she wasn't the one holding. Her friends, however, were carrying cocaine.

Her mother showed up at the station house at four o'clock in the morning and bailed her out. When they got into her mom's Camry, Darla noticed her suitcase, the one she used to take to pageants, was packed and sitting on the back seat.

Instead of taking her home, her mother drove her to the train station and handed her a one-way ticket to New York City. She told her daughter that she was no longer welcome in the family home. She was a bad influence and it had been decided that until she got her drug use under control and straightened herself up, she wasn't fit to be around impressionable children such as her baby brother. She had called a cousin in Brooklyn, who had agreed to take Darla in for the time being.

And with that her mother drove off and left her standing on the train platform, suitcase in one hand, ticket in the other, with a hole in her heart and tears running down her face like rainwater.

Her first clue that her exile might not be as awful as she first feared came upon being met at the platform by her cousin, Wendy. She was her mom's first cousin, but was as different from her in terms of temperament as day from night. She wasn't exactly cutting edge, but she was a New Yorker, and compared to the folks back home, she was cool.

The first thing Wendy did was set up her ground rules: no bringing friends home when she wasn't there, and nothing stronger than beer or pot was to be consumed in the apartment. "If you're looking to get trashed and fucked up—fine. Just don't do it where we live."

"Where we live" turned out to be a one bedroom walk-up in a funky section of Brooklyn known as Williamsburg, which was full of artists and other bohemian-types who had fled the development squeeze and subsequent rent hikes in Alphabet City.

As it turned out, Wendy worked as a chef for a catering company that provided food and drink for some of the Big Apple's snootiest charity events. She pulled a couple of strings at work and got Darla a job off the books.

The money was good and the work steady. All those years spent of learning poise, charm and smiling even when she felt like shit gave her an edge over the other servers, which translated into large tips. For the first time in her young life, Darla was making her own way, and was being treated like an adult, not an unruly child.

If her mother expected her to come crawling back on her hands and knees after a few weeks of being on her own, begging to be allowed back into the stifling confines of the family's python-like embrace, she was sorely disappointed. Instead of being scared by the big bad city and wanting to come home, she thrived on the energy that surrounded her and began to clean up her act—although her mother would not have agreed that cutting back to just pot and beer qualified as "cleaning up her act".

Wendy, unlike Darla's mother, was more interested in attaining perfection with pastries than humans. And she couldn't have cared less about Darla's preference for women. As she herself once said: "I don't care what you do or who you do it with, as long as you keep it indoors and don't scare my cats."

For the most part, those early days in the city were idyllic ones. She had a decent job, and although she had to sleep on her cousin's sofa in the living room, it was still a decent place to stay with fairly easy house rules.

Liberated from her mother's obsessive control, she was free to explore the New York gay and lesbian scene, and by the time she was seventeen she had a decent circle of friends, many of whom she met through the Lambda Youth Network, a support group designed for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender teens. She was even thinking about taking her GED and trying to go to Hunter College as a part-time student.

Then the company she worked for was hired to cater a fundraiser for the Museum of Arts and Design, and everything changed forever.

While she was working, she was approached by a very elegant older woman who told her that she was too beautiful and too unique to be wasting her life carrying a tray. At first, Darla thought she was being hit on. It certainly wouldn't be the first time that had happened on the job, but the woman simply handed her a business card and

told her to call when she was ready to drink the champagne she was carrying around, not simply serve it to others.

When she got home, she showed Wendy the card and told her what the woman had said. Wendy's jaw nearly dropped to the floor.

"Merlot? *The Merlot* offered you a job?"

"I wouldn't say she offered me a job..."

"She pretty much promised to turn you into a model! What do you call *that*?"

"I don't know. Why would she want to do that? I'm far from perfect."

"Perfect? What the hell does *perfect* have to do with it?"

Wendy grabbed her younger cousin by the elbow and dragged her into the tiny bathroom, positioning her before the medicine cabinet. She stood behind Darla, her hands resting firmly on her shoulders so she couldn't turn away.

"Look at yourself, Darla. You're beautiful. You've always been beautiful, no matter what you might think. She's right. You deserve better than being a coat check girl or a waitress. You just have to be brave enough to step up and take the chance."

"But what if I fail?"

Wendy shrugged. "Then you fail. There's no shame in that. But you'll certainly never be a model if you don't even try."

The very next day, Darla walked into Merlot's office and began her transformation into Chardonnay. The transition from the teenaged lesbian punk rocker to ultra-glamorous high fashion model wasn't nearly as bumpy as one might expect. After all, her mother had raised her to be looked at by others, and that's exactly how she intended to live her life.

In many ways, Merlot reminded Chardonnay of her own mother. She was most decidedly a perfectionist, but her drive to provide her clients with ideal faces and bodies came not out of a twisted need to live through others but sheer economics. After all, she was in the business of supplying beautiful people to those who made clothes, watches, perfumes, cosmetics and other luxuries who wanted to sell them to a world full of less than beautiful people yearning to attain perfection.

When her face started popping up on the cover of *Seventeen* and *Teen Vogue*, things really started hopping. Then there was her runway debut, where she wowed the crowd with her brash swagger. There was a wildness to her that made even the most jaded reviewer sit up and take notice.

As the money started coming in for real, she finally left Wendy's funky little walk-up and moved across the river into a two-bedroom condo in the Village. She didn't really want to leave Williamsburg, but Merlot kept insisting that she needed to upgrade her image. After all, the right address meant a lot in the business. Before she left, Chardonnay gave Wendy money to set up her own catering business as a show of gratitude for all she had done for her.

Not long after she got her own apartment, she invited her mother to come up to the city and visit her. In retrospect, she wondered what the hell she thought was going to happen. Except for a few phone calls and the mandatory Christmas and birthday cards, Chardonnay had not laid eyes on her mother since the day she so unceremoniously put her on the train, nearly two years before.

She really didn't expect her mother to accept the invitation. After all, she was a thing of the suburbs. Growing up, all she had heard from her mother was a litany of how she was terrified of gridlock, frightened by the prospect of being accosted by panhandlers and anxious about getting lost and ending up in the wrong end of town. Traveling into Philadelphia was a huge ordeal for her, much less going to someplace like New York City.

Maybe she thought that once her mother got to see how her daughter was being treated by famous people such as Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein, and how she was already making more money at eighteen than her disgusting pig of a stepfather ever would, her mother would realize the error she had made by treating her the way she had.

Maybe she would breakdown, tell her that she was sorry, accept her for who she was and would no longer treat her like some kind of changeling left in place of her "real" daughter.

It started off well enough, with Chardonnay giving her mother a tour of the city, taking her to all the touristy places like the Tavern

On The Green, the Museum of Natural History, and the Empire State Building. It was a pleasant enough evening, and her mother ended up turning in early, at least by Chardonnay's standards. Bored, she decided to go back out for a nightcap. She stopped by a nearby lesbian bar she occasionally frequented and ran into an old girlfriend of hers named Ellie. One thing led to another and they ended up over at her place.

The next morning her mother was up and about early, fixing some coffee, when Ellie walked out of her bedroom nude and down the hallway, past the kitchen, to the bathroom. To say her mother went ballistic was an understatement. She stormed into Chardonnay's bedroom while she was still asleep and started ranting at her at the top of her lungs. "You just brought that trollop over here so you could parade your perverted lifestyle under my nose!"

She was probably right. Why else would she set herself up for such a knock-down? In her heart of hearts she was still the angry, jealous little girl, mad at mommy for ignoring her in favor of someone else. She was still trying to get back at her mother, to pay her back for the repeated betrayals at her hands throughout the years.

Her mother refused to spend one more minute in a house where "those kind of things go on" and demanded that Chardonnay call her a cab so she could go back to Penn Station and take the next train back to Chester County as fast as possible. The minute her mother left for home, Chardonnay called up a dealer she knew and bought the first gram of cocaine she'd snorted since the night she got busted for the car.

Chardonnay's return to hard drugs did not go unnoticed by her cousin, who had almost talked her into going into rehab. Those plans were dropped, however, when just a week before Chardonnay was scheduled to sign into the clinic, her cousin Wendy was killed in the World Trade Center disaster while catering a business brunch for a commodities company in Tower One. Chardonnay took her cousin's death exceptionally hard and her drug use expanded to include OxyContin and Ecstasy.

At the time, Chardonnay was living with a pretty twenty year-old paralegal, named Jennifer. Of all the girlfriends she'd had, Jennifer

was probably the closest to recapturing the heat and the romance of her first love. She was stable, good-natured, tolerant, and physically affectionate—all the things Chardonnay needed from her lovers. However, her lover's tolerance did not extend to Chardonnay's drug habit.

Jennifer had a nine to five job that required her to be at work on time and be on the ball while she was there. She did not have the luxury, or the need, to party every night. Chardonnay's insistence on doing drugs and staying out until four in the morning nearly every night of the week eventually became a sore spot between the lovers, which then quickly evolved into an open wound. One afternoon, as Jennifer was getting home from work and Chardonnay was getting out of bed, her lover finally told her that she'd had enough of the late nights, the drugs, and the constant partying. It was time for Chardonnay to make a decision: What was it going to be? Her or the drugs?

Ten minutes later she was naked, sobbing and threatening to kill herself, all the while chasing Jennifer down her building's hallway to the elevator. When it became clear that her lover was not going to relent and return to the apartment with her, she began to scream abuse at the top of her voice. She could still remember the look of disgusted disappointment on Jennifer's face as the elevator doors shut, removing her from her life once and for all.

She was still collapsed on the floor before the elevator, naked and sobbing, when the cops showed up. They arrested her for creating a public disturbance and, when she bit one of them, resisting arrest and attacking a police officer in the line of duty. She spent the next eight hours in the drunk tank down at the local precinct, dressed in a pair of loose fitting Day-Glo orange overalls.

She had used her one phone call to try and reach Jennifer, hoping she would let bygones be bygones and rush to her aid, but she only got her voice mail. When someone finally showed up, it was an attorney hired by Merlot, who arrived at the station house with a bundle of Hugo Boss, Calvin Klein and DKNY to replace her jailhouse jumpsuit.

Once she was freed and properly dressed, the attorney hustled her out a side door, past the lower-rung paparazzi camped out on the front steps that had learned of her arrest via their police scanners, and were now eagerly awaiting her release. There was a dark sedan waiting for her at the end of the street, which took her straight to Merlot's office, where the older woman was waiting for her, a Martini in hand. Whatever tongue-lashing and/or career advice Chardonnay expected to receive from the only remaining role model in her life, it wasn't what she received.

"Darling, if there is one thing you must understand about the business your are in, it is this: while the fashion industry loves 'attitude', it detests public outbursts. You can be as lesbian as you like. Provided you never go on record as such. While men might find such information about you... titillating... you must remember that women buy the vast majority of the products your face is used to advertise.

"And why do these women buy the clothes, the fragrances, the cosmetics, and the hair care products your face is associated with? To make themselves alluring to men. However, they might choose differently if they think that the products your face is selling will result in their attracting other women. That is not to say that you cannot have a career as a model if your private life goes public. However, you *will* find yourself marginalized if you do. The bigger, more commercial accounts will not be as eager to line you up as their new spokesmodel should you officially come out of the closet. I know it seems hypocritical, given the personal preferences of many of those who work within the industry, but I am merely stating a fact, my dear.

"Now, as to the drugs..." She took a deep sigh and shrugged her shoulders. "I don't really care what drugs you do or how much you use, provided it does not interfere with a shoot or compromise your looks. My only hard and fast rule is no needles. Hypodermic tracks turn off clients. As for myself, I have no problem with heroin chic, provided that the smack is snorted, not run up a vein."

So Chardonnay was given free reign to do as she saw fit, provided no one knew the truth about her appetites, both sexual and chemical.

All her friends and lovers had warned her about the drugs—at least the friends that weren't doing drugs, too. But what the fuck? Better to die young and leave a good-looking corpse, right? Besides, at the age of twenty-two she felt like she's seen more and done more than most people who live to see eighty-five. Besides, after a year or two, she no longer knew anyone who didn't do hard drugs. That solved that problem, didn't it? That just left the lovers.

Following Jennifer walking out on her, she decided that all loving somebody got you was a door slammed in your face, be it metaphorical or physical. And even if the people she loved didn't leave her of their own free will, the pain caused by their passing was too excruciating to endure. Better to play the field and base everything on physical need and personal convenience rather than genuine intimacy and trust. It was safer that way, at least for her. Whenever she became involved with someone, the minute it started getting serious, whether on her end or the other person's, she would find some way of sabotaging the relationship, usually via her drug use or promiscuity.

Over the last four years she had bedded dozens, if not hundreds of young women. Like her father before her, she was attractive and had a way with the ladies.

And she knew it.

Those she took as lovers were often surprised, if not dismayed, to find her, despite her sexually aggressive demeanor, very needy and demanding person. She craved their attention and love, but was unwilling to reciprocate in kind. She required that her lovers be focused on her wants and needs all the time, even to the exclusion of their own lives and careers, and that they validate her. Of course, few were willing to surrender to the will of such a capricious goddess, and those that were soon found themselves forced from her life.

Better that the tears being shed were *for* her rather than *by* her was how she chose to view her casual tossing aside of those who claimed to love her. She kept telling herself that none of these women who fell into her bed had ever truly loved *her*. They had loved Chardonnay, the perfect woman—an artificial construct that did not exist except on the printed page.

The same attitude held true to the people who worked with her. None of them were truly her friends. They were Chardonnay's friends. This was like saying they were the friends of her imaginary playmate.

Shiraz, Chablis—they were simply people she knew, as easily replaceable as a broken lamp or a worn out pair of bedroom slippers. She might miss those exact things for a while, but she could not bring herself to shed real tears over their loss, and to make sure that was the case, she was going to get as high as a kite tonight. After all, she had a good excuse. Her friend was dead. The sympathy card alone was sure to bag her a bisexual secretary out for a little bit of fun behind her boyfriend's back.

As she strolled into Dolly's she scanned the room. It was still early in the evening, and there were just a handful of other women lounging about, most of them already paired up with friends or lovers. She went to the bar and ordered an old fashioned. While she was waiting for her cocktail to be served, she decided to duck into the restroom to powder her nose.

She went into one of the stalls, locked the door behind her, and sat down on the toilet fully dressed, reached inside her purse and removed a flat silver business card case, which housed her razorblades. She then used the flat metal surface of the oversized toilet paper dispenser next to her to cut and chop herself a couple of rails of blow. She returned the razorblade to its case and placed a small hollow silver tube the length of her little finger to her left nostril. With a couple of expert inhalations she consumed the cocaine, rubbing the bottom of her nostrils with her folded index finger to remove any residue that might be visible. It wasn't much of a bump, but it was enough to get her back up on her feet and ready for the night ahead, whatever it might bring her way. More importantly, the rush that the cocaine brought chased away the last, lingering images of Shiraz's lifeless face. Feeling revitalized, she left the bathroom and headed back to the bar to pick up her drink.

As she sipped her old-fashioned, she gave the bar another cursory scan. Dolly's had been around since the early Sixties, and the décor was definitely old school, complete with dark wooden paneling,

wooden cask chairs, red leatherette bar stools, and very dark, deeply recessed booths lining the back wall. Late at night and on the weekends a deejay came in and spun discs for the women who crowded the small dance floor, but up until happy hour, there wasn't much to separate Dolly's from any other bar on the block, except for the fact they didn't have a men's room.

Chardonnay liked Dolly's because it catered mostly to professional women who weren't looking to rock the boat or draw a lot of attention to themselves. A good number of them were women secretaries, executive assistants, and the like "experimenting" before settling down to married life. In any case, the women who normally frequented Dolly's were less likely to try and out her, either deliberately or accidentally on purpose.

As she looked around, she spotted a woman seated in one of the booths at the back of the bar. Although her face was turned away from hers, Chardonnay could see a luxurious mane of hair the color of raw honey tumbling past the other woman's shoulders, and a pair of long, nicely shaped legs. Smiling to herself, she strolled over to the booth, drink in hand.

"Hi. I couldn't help notice you're by yourself. Would you care for some company?"

The woman in the booth jerked as if she'd been poked with a cattle prod and turned to face Chardonnay, her yellowish-brown hair swinging like a silken tapestry.

The face that looked back her was as perfect and immobile as a mask—because that was what it was.

"Sherry? Is that you?" Chardonnay blurted out.

The former model gasped upon recognizing her friend and quickly turned away, as if she could somehow disappear into the shadows of the booth.

Chardonnay slid into the booth opposite her friend, a look of dazed surprise on her face. "What the hell are you doing here? I mean... I didn't know you were? Are you?"

"No," the other woman said, a little too quickly to be convincing. "It's not what you think. Look, I was going to go to Shiraz's funeral. That's the honest truth. But as I was walking up the street to the

funeral home, I saw Brut and Rose get out of a taxi just ahead of me. They didn't see me because they were so wrapped up in each other, but I saw *them*.

"They were laughing and giggling, and Brut had his hands all over her. I felt so humiliated. There was no way I could go into the funeral home, not after seeing them like that. So I left and went inside the first bar where I knew I wouldn't have to see or deal with any men. It just happened to be this one."

"Brut's a real asshole," Chardonnay agreed. There's no two ways around that. Here, let me get you another." Chardonnay waved the waitress over to the booth. "What were you drinking, sugar?"

"A cosmopolitan. With a straw, please." She sighed deeply as she watched the woman walk back to the bar with her order. "I know Brut doesn't care about me any more, but I thought he'd at least act differently with someone else, but he behaved the exact same way with her as he did with me. It's like I was a Barbie doll or something—like he simply took my head off and snapped another one on, and it's all the same to him. I thought we had something unique, you know? Something real. But it was all just an illusion. I'm sick of how men lie to you, exploit you, then cast you aside when they're done with you."

"They're nothing but dogs. You're better off without them."

Just then the cocktail waitress returned with Sherry's cosmopolitan.

"You're so sweet to buy me a drink," Sherry said to Chardonnay.

"Why shouldn't I buy you a drink?"

"Well, the last time we were together I wasn't on my best behavior."

"Are you kidding? Everyone's entitled to be a bitch now and then," she said with a laugh. "God knows I've been one more than once in my life."

"How was it then?"

"What?"

"The funeral."

Chardonnay pantomimed an over-exaggerated shudder. "Creepy. I'd rather not talk about it, to tell you the truth."

Sherry nodded her understanding and the two fell into small talk, with Chardonnay doing most of the chatting as she dished up the latest dirt on the various photographers, models, editors and designers they both knew. As they gossiped back and forth, Chardonnay found herself staring at Sherry. Not at her face, which was hidden behind the doll-like features of the mask she wore, but at her exposed cleavage and shoulders.

Sherry was wearing a simple black Dior spaghetti strap dress with a matching shrug jacket, which she had discarded after her second drink, exposing skin as smooth and firm as a racing horse's flank. At first Chardonnay was somewhat baffled, because she could have sworn that Sherry's accident had not only damaged her face, but a good part of her upper torso as well, including her right arm. But she must have been mistaken—or either Sherry had benefited from some excellent plastic surgeons, because her body seemed as perfect as it was before the flaming debris from the *Coral Clipper* slammed down.

Chardonnay had always had a thing for Sherry, even though she knew the other model wasn't interested. Not that a simple fact such as Sherry being straight was that great an obstacle. She was far more comfortable playing the part of the seducer anyway. After all, she'd spent her childhood trying to get her mother to love her.

The Sherry sitting before her was not the same one she'd had a crush on, but still, the lust was there. If not more intense than before. Sure, she had bedded dozens of beautiful women—including fellow models, movie starlets and rock stars. But where was the thrill in that? Here was a challenge with a serious twist, one that gave it a wickedly kinky spin.

By her third old-fashioned, Chardonnay decided she would go for it. After all, Sherry was sending out signals like a wounded seal in a tank full of sharks. She was lonely, sexually frustrated and willing to do whatever it took to connect with another human being. No doubt she felt that since no man would look at her now, she might as well give the other side of a coin a try.

Chardonnay leaned forward so she could be heard over the music. "I was thinking—you want to come back over to my place? The drinks

are free and I've got some killer blow."

A couple minutes later they were hailing a cab, giggling and laughing like schoolgirls as the driver sped to midtown. As the pulled up at the address Chardonnay had given the driver, Sherry gazed up at the art deco apartment building. Her voice was muffled by the mask, but there was no disguising the awe in her voice.

"You live in the penthouse here? I didn't know you were doing that well."

Chardonnay shrugged as she paid off the driver. "Well, I had a little help. I inherited some money from a relative a couple of years ago, plus I got a deal on the property. I was seeing this chick who was working as an assistant to The Donald. She locked me into this ridiculously low rate."

They rode the elevator up to the top floor of the building. When the elevator doors opened, they were greeted by a marble and gold foyer. Chardonnay reached into her purse and withdrew a ring of keys and unlocked the solid mahogany front door, swinging it open to expose an exquisite duplex penthouse right off Fifth Avenue. The grand entrance boasted a beautiful wooden spiral staircase that lead to the upper floor, where the three bedrooms and bathrooms were located. The entrance level boasted a traditional full-style dining room, a modern kitchen, and a large living room with a wood burning fireplace, oversized windows, high ceilings, and hardwood floors Covered by a hodgepodge of oriental carpets. With its terrace off the living room offering a southern city views, Chardonnay's apartment was indeed stunning, despite the dishes heaped in the sink and the dirty clothes scattered about the floor.

"You have this place all to yourself?" Sherry asked, looking around admiringly.

"I know it's too big for me, but the deal was too good to pass up. And it's a good address. Merlot was all on us about having the right address, you know. I'll fix us a drink," Chardonnay said as she threw her jacket onto a nearby leather chair. The jacket slithered off the seat and fell onto the floor, where it lay crumpled and forgotten, like a shed snake skin.

Chardonnay moved over to the wet bar next to the fireplace in the living room and poured generous doses of bourbon into a couple of high ball glasses, followed by a splash of cherry Diet Coke. She placed a cocktail straw into the stronger of the two drinks and handed it to Sherry. She then went and sat down on the sofa beside the other woman, but not too close. She knew she had to start somewhere, but she hadn't figured out exactly where the best opening might be, so she continued the chitchat.

"You should see the closet space in this place. I've got a walk-in bigger than most New Yorkers' bedrooms. And the terraces! I've got a hot tub set up on the one outside my bedroom. I tell you, there's nothing like sitting there with a bottle of Dom, watching the moon rise over Manhattan."

"It sounds wonderful."

Chardonnay's ears pricked up. Here was the opening she was looking for. "You want to try it out while you're here?"

"But I don't have a suit."

"That's okay. I'm sure I have one around here that will fit you."

"It's really nice of you to offer, Chard, but I don't know..."

"C'mon, Sherry. Who's it going to hurt?" Chardonnay edged closer to Sherry and took her hand in hers and squeezed it.

Sherry turned the mask that covered her face to her. It was impossible to tell if she was responding favorably or not to Chardonnay's overture, but in the atmospheric lighting of the room, the mask mimicked Sherry's original features to a startling degree. If anything, she looked even more perfect than when her features were made of flesh and blood, not papier-mâché and enamel paint.

Then, after what seemed an eternity, Sherry moved forward and put her arms around Chardonnay, closing her in a warm embrace. Chardonnay nuzzled the other woman's neck, breathing in the scent of CK Obsession. She could hear Sherry's breathing grow louder and faster within the mask. She desperately wanted to touch herself or have Sherry touch her, but she knew that would have to wait.

Sherry pulled away, her body trembling like a tightly pulled bowstring. "You know what's been the worst part of this whole ordeal?" she whispered, her voice barely audible beyond the confines

of the mask. "Since I got hurt, the only people who have actually touched me have been doctors, nurses, physical therapists—that kind of thing. Since the accident, I only get touched as a patient. I forgot how it feels to be touched as a woman. Until now."

Bingo! Chardonnay had to fight to keep herself from grinning. This was going to be easier than she'd thought. She quickly downed her drink and leaned forward, putting her hand on Sherry's knee and keeping it there.

"Why don't you finish your drink and I'll run upstairs and get the hot tub ready?"

"Sounds good to me," Sherry said, lifting her glass in imitation of a toast. Chardonnay could not tell if she was smiling or not, but her body language seemed inviting enough.

The model hurried out of the living room and up the wooden spiral staircase that led to the second level of the penthouse. The master bedroom was down the hall and faced the north, and featured a master bathroom with a marble Roman tub, a separate multi-head shower stall, a toilet *and* a bidet. As splendid as that was, the real selling point, as far as Chardonnay was concerned, was the hot tub installed on the northern terrace, accessible only via her bedroom.

Chardonnay kicked off her shoes as she entered her walk-in closet and began searching the half-open drawers for bathing suits for both Sherry and herself. After finding a gold-colored maillot for her guest, she changed swiftly into a black bikini, then opened the drawer to the nightstand to retrieve her stash. She took the portable makeup mirror from the master bath and placed it on the corner of the sink basin, so that she could sit on the toilet and chop the coke up on the mirror's surface. After snorting the lines, she leaned back against the toilet lid and stared off into space for a moment, trying to figure out what her next move should be.

Despite her background as a model, Sherry really wasn't that different from any of the bi-curious secretaries Chardonnay had seduced in the past. Girls like that were usually easy to manipulate into sexual situations, provided the mood was kept appropriately giggly and girly, with an atmosphere of playful exploration. Toys were good for that. They provided a degree of separation that

dispelled any anxiety or uncertainty. After all, they were just playing around, right? It wasn't like they were *really* having sex. At least that's how they justified it to themselves later.

Chardonnay got up and opened the bottom drawer of her dresser, which served as her "toy chest", and removed a pearlescent plastic tube about the size of a lipstick case with a silky nylon cord hanging from one end. The vibrator was discrete, powerful and, best of all, waterproof. She twisted the base and the battery-operated vibe buzzed to life, pulsing in her hand with surprising vitality for something so small. Good. It still worked.

Now this should make for some interesting moments while snuggling in the hot tub, she thought with a smile as she dropped the tiny vibrator down the front of her bikini bottom.

She padded across the bedroom and opened the French doors that led to the outside terrace. The hot tub was a standard hard-shell home spa unit, with a solid cedar cabinetry that could accommodate up to five individuals, and was kept running most of the time, to insure that the hundreds of gallons of water inside it remained the right temperature. The insulated all-weather cover that helped trap the heat and keep detritus from falling into the tub was still in place. The octagonal vinyl lid had four handles sewn onto its edges, dual twenty-gauge rust-proof steel C-channels that provided maximum support across its center, to prevent heat loss from sagging, and was hinged in the middle so it could be removed by whoever was using the spa. Shortly after moving in, Chardonnay had installed an automatic cover lift, which, with the flip of a switch, folded back the cumbersome, forty pound lid and stowed it behind the hot tub while it was in use, like the automatic roof of a convertible.

Chardonnay turned on the lift and as it began to crank back the cover on the spa, she climbed the wide, two-step molded plastic stairs that led to the tub itself in order to check the thermostat set into the control panel on the outer rim. The water temperature was one hundred and four. Perfect. She punched a couple of buttons and the Jacuzzi jets kicked into play, churning the steaming water into froth.

As she turned to climb down the stairs, Chardonnay spotted what looked to be a leaf floating on the surface of the bubbling water. Typical. Every time she took the lid off the damn tub, it seemed some kind of detritus would find its way in—even though she was thirty-five storeys up. She sighed and leaned forward to scoop the errant greenery from the spa. As if sensing her intent, the leaf bobbed just out of reach, forcing her to lean forward on tiptoe. As she did so, her pubic bone struck the rim of the tub, accidentally bumping the twist-turn knob on the vibrator she had stuck down the front of her bikini bottom.

The vibrator surged to life, sending intense sensations shooting through Chardonnay's body. The model cried out in equal parts surprise and pleasure as she lost her balance and toppled headfirst into the hot tub. As her head went under the water, all she could hear was the gushing sound of the dozens of jets churning the heated water around her like a whirlpool. Because of that, she did not hear the automatic cover lift suddenly turn itself back on, as if a spectral hand had reached out and flipped its switch. Nor was she aware of the thermostat on the hot tub suddenly readjusting itself from one hundred and four to one hundred and twenty degrees.

Once she regained her footing, Chardonnay stood up, sputtering and coughing, wiping the chlorine from her eyes. "Motherfucker!" she exclaimed as she spat a mouthful of water over the side of the tub. Only then did she hear the cover lift's motor. Frowning, she looked up, just in time for the dual twenty-gauge rustproof steel C-channels that supported the spa to come crashing down on her head.

Although Chardonnay's skull was split open like a melon, she was still alive as she was driven to her knees below the churning white water. She was still conscious as the cover clicked back into place, sealing her in a dark, seething cauldron of blood and pool cleaning chemicals. As she slid into darkness deeper than any sleep she had ever known, she tried to call out for help, only to have hot water rush into her lungs.

Sherry stood by the open French doors, hugging her elbows as she watched the cover of the spa slide back into place. Her breath was loud and ragged inside the mask. She thought she could hear a

muffled thumping, as if Chardonnay was beating against the underside of the tub with her fists, but the sound quickly faded. She turned and walked across the master bedroom toward a huge vanity table next to the bed. She seated herself before the lighted mirror and stared at the reflection of her masked face and waited for the change.

When it came she gasped and arched her back, shivering as the cold seared its way through her lower jaw. It was both painful and exquisite, nowhere like an orgasm, and yet far from agony.

With trembling fingers she removed the mask and stared at herself. The lower right quadrant of her face, from the cheekbone to the middle of her lips, back to the jaw line, was as smooth and as free of imperfections as it had been when she strode the catwalks in Milan. The rest of her resembled wax paper laid over raw hamburger, molded into the approximate shape of a human countenance. She reached up and traced the smooth, unmarred line of her jaw. The flesh underneath her fingers felt as cold as the grave, but at that moment she couldn't have cared less.

It was ten o'clock in the morning as Marisol stepped out of the elevator into the marble foyer of the apartment building. She was dressed in her maid's whites and was there to clean the apartment. It was a relatively easy job, since the fashion model who employed her was rarely home.

What work Marisol had to do usually involved picking up discarded clothes, washing dishes, doing the laundry, some light vacuuming, taking out the empty liquor bottles and seeing that the hot tub was properly cleaned and serviced on schedule. As she reached inside her pocket for the keys, she noticed that the front door was slightly ajar.

Marisol frowned. Although her employer often stayed out late and came home intoxicated, she had never left the front door unlocked before. She stepped inside and looked around the main entrance.

"Hello? Senorita? Are you home?"

She waited for an answer, but received only silence in reply. She glanced in the living room, but nothing seemed amiss. She glanced down at her wristwatch. Perhaps her employer had gone off on an early photo shoot and, in her haste, had not closed the door properly behind her.

Shrugging off the anomaly, Marisol set about her chores, first washing the dishes awaiting her in the kitchen, then picking up the dirty clothes scattered about the apartment's six rooms. After retrieving the various garments strewn about the living room—ranging from panties to a silk jacket—she headed upstairs to the master bedroom. As she busied herself with stripping the linens off the queen-sized bed and switching the bath towels, she became aware of a muffled bumping sound coming from the direction of the terrace.

Upon opening the French doors that led to the hot tub area, the thumping sound became noticeably louder. She could see that the hot tub was on, as usual, and that the cover was in place. Whatever was making the thumping sound was coming from inside the tub. No doubt her employer had accidentally left another empty wine bottle behind, and that was what was making the noise. In any case, she needed to remove whatever was floating around, in case it ended up blocking one of the filters and caused the tub to overflow.

Marisol flicked the automatic cover lift switch, but the motor did not engage. Apparently the mechanism had shorted out. That meant she would have to raise the cumbersome lid by hand.

She sighed and clucked her tongue as she climbed up the stairs accessing the home spa and grabbed the nearest handle on the hinged hot tub lid. She was not a very tall woman, just over five foot, so it took all her upper body strength for her to pull the heavy insulated cover back and over onto itself.

The moment the lid flipped back, a cloud of chlorinated steam struck her full in the face, causing her to squint. She looked down into the churning water and saw that the cause of the mysterious bumping sound wasn't an empty wine bottle, but a human head, floating face down, bumping against the side of the spa. The bubbling water was tinged pinkish red from the blood that had come

from the gaping wound at the top of the dead woman's skull. And from the corpse's cropped hair, Marisol knew exactly whom it was floating face down in the hot tub.

"Madre Dios! Senorita!"

Even though she knew her employer was dead, Marisol instinctively tried to pull her out of the water. However, after spending the better part of a day in water of a hundred and twenty degrees, Chardonnay's corpse was in no condition to be so roughly handled.

There was a wet, sucking noise, like that of a stewed chicken being pulled pulled apart, as Chardonnay's upper right arm came off at the shoulder—followed immediately by a very long, very loud scream.

TEN

Gunter rolled over and stared at the digital alarm clock on the nightstand next to his bed. Although his eyes were still caked with sleep, he could make out the numerals seven, three and zero. Seven-thirty in the morning. No, make that seven-thirty in the *fucking* morning. He had been asleep less than four hours. Who the hell would be banging on his front door at such an ungodly hour?

Grumbling in his native tongue, he pulled on a pair of lounging pants and stuck his feet into the slippers Cabernet had bought him as an early father's day present. He stomped down the stairs of his townhouse, his poor mood quickly turning genuinely foul. Whoever was at the front door had apparently wearied of using their fists and was now repeatedly ringing the doorbell.

"I hear you, you verdammt Schafskopf!" he shouted at the door.

He jerked the door open without looking through the spyhole. This early in the morning he wouldn't have been able to focus well enough to tell who it was anyway.

"What the fuck do you want?"

Brut was standing on the other side of the threshold, jaw unshaven and hair uncombed, eyes rimmed with red. It was the only time Gunter could ever recall seeing the male model looking anything but perfectly groomed. In one hand he held the early morning edition of the *New York Post*. His hands were shaking so badly the pages of the tabloid looked like a stiff breeze was rifling them.

"She... she's dead," was all Brut could say.

"Who's dead?" Gunter snapped, grabbing the model by his shirtfront and yanking him inside the front door.

Brut simply shook his head and shoved the newspaper into Gunter's hand by way of an answer. It was the morning edition of the *Post* with the banner headline: "MODEL FOUND STEWED TO THE GILLS". Below it was a fairly recent glamour shot of Chardonnay, with a smaller inset showing the coroner's office removing a shrouded body from a ritzy Fifth Avenue apartment building. Gunter opened the tabloid to the inside page, and saw a second headline that

read: "THE CURSE OF PIER THIRTEEN: IS DEATH STALKING THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE?".

The photographer pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and lowered his head. He then looked up at the terrified model standing before him. Seeing the look of absolute fear in the younger man's eyes, his initial irritability began to slip away.

"You look like you could use some coffee. Fuck, we both could use some. You better come on into the kitchen and sit down. I'll brew something up."

"Wh... where's Cabby?" Brut asked, as he followed him toward the back of the townhouse.

Gunter's kitchen was all stainless steel and burnished chrome, with a marble-topped chef's island that served both as a preparation surface and a breakfast bar. The photographer motioned for Brut to seat himself on a long-legged bar stool while he busied himself with fixing a pot of coffee.

"She's up in Cape Cod, visiting her grandparents for a few days. I thought it might be good for her, what with all that's been going on lately. I got back myself around three this morning. I hadn't bothered to turn on a radio or watch the television the whole time I was out of the city. I didn't know."

"Neither did I," Brut said with a sigh. "Not really, anyway. I'd heard on the news yesterday evening a famous model had been found dead in her apartment, but they didn't give out any names. They only just released her identity this morning."

"How did she die?"

"Drowned. In her hot tub, of all places. Although there was something about drug use. Maybe that's why they didn't release too much info at first. They were investigating to see if it was, you know, a murder. But now they're saying it was an accident."

"Of course. What else could it be?" Gunter said, dumping a carafe of filtered water into the Mr Coffee machine.

"I dunno," Brut said, chewing his thumbnail. "You're the one who kept talking about Death. And that weird old Jewish guy said he could see some kind of shadow on our faces. Besides, the reporters are starting to notice too."

"How could they miss it?" Gunter's voice dripped acid. "Three models have died under very strange circumstances in just over a week. Celebrity deaths may come in threes, but never like this!"

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you ever noticed it before?" Gunter asked as he placed a steaming cup of Sumatran before his guest. "When famous people die—whether they're actors, politicians, artists, writers, musicians—they always seem to do it in groups of threes? You might get two actors and a musician, or a world leader plus an actor and an artist, or some combination like that, but you'll never get all three being in the same business, unless they were killed traveling together—like Buddy Holly, Richie Valens and the Big Bopper were."

"Who?"

"Just take my word for it that they're famous, okay?" Gunter sighed, trying to fight becoming irritated again.

"So you're saying the odds of three fashion models dying accidentally within a few days of each other are...?"

"Astronomical."

"So they were murdered."

"No. I'm just saying they weren't accidents."

Brut tilted his head back and forth, a baffled look on his face. "If they didn't die *accidentally*, and they weren't *murdered*—then what the hell happened to them?"

"They were killed."

"Right. Like I said. They were murdered."

"No. Not murdered, killed. Look, when you swat a mosquito, are you murdering it?"

"No."

"Have you ever had to put out rat poison or use a mouse trap? Was that murder? And don't give me any animal rights bullshit."

Brut frowned for a long moment, his brows kitted together. "I don't like where you're going with this, dude."

"I don't like it either, but there's nowhere else for this *to go*," Gunter said, stirring his coffee. "Brut, have you given any thought to what happened to us that day in Florida? Did you ever think 'why us?' Why should we've been the only ones not to die?"

"No. Not really," the younger man said with a shrug. "I just thought it just wasn't our time, y'know?"

"But what if it *was* our time? What if we *were* meant to die that day?"

A look of genuine fright crossed the male model's handsome face. "Dude, I don't want to go there, and neither do you!"

Gunter hit the marble counter-top with his fist hard enough to make his coffee cup jump. "Damn it, Brut! Don't you think I would rather not think these thoughts, much less speak them out loud? I'm still a young man. I've got a good career. I'm about to become a father with the woman I love! I have everything, *everything* to live for. I would like nothing better than to turn my face to the wall and ignore the sense of dread growing within me. But I cannot escape the certainty that I am living on borrowed time. All of us are. You, me, Rose, Cabby, Sherry. We have been since that day in Miami. The only difference now is that we know it."

"Dude, there's got to be *something* we can do to stop this thing from killing us, right?"

"Like what? It's not like we can call the police and tell them that we know that Death is out to get us."

"Yeah, but, I mean, there's always *something*, right? A silver bullet or holy water or some kind of magic spell?"

Gunter laughed humorlessly. "What is it with you Americans? You always think there is a quick fix—a way of bending the rules so they don't have to apply to you. This is Death we are talking about. Not a vampire or werewolf. This is reality, Brut. Not some stupid horror movie! Whatever is going on, it is beyond my ability to understand, much less control it."

"Then what can we do?"

Gunter shrugged and shook his head. "Death clearly has its own designs for us. But exactly where we fit in, and when, is uncertain. The best thing to do would be to narrow down the opportunities for disaster. I've disposed of my in-house dark room. I told Cabernet it was because I didn't want the baby exposed to potentially dangerous chemicals in the environment. All I can recommend is that you watch yourself—and Rose—as closely as possible. Don't do anything that

might put you at risk. That means steer clear of the drugs and the alcohol, or anything else that might make you careless. Stay away from chemicals, industrial machinery, that kind of thing. Look both ways before you cross the street, and stay the hell out of the subway. Don't bathe with electrical equipment anywhere near your bathroom. And stay as far away from anything pointy or sharp as much as possible."

"Great," Brut sighed. "What a trade off. I'll live, but my life's going to suck."

Brut walked most of the way home from Gunter's Village townhouse lost in thought. Or what passed for thought with him, which meant he spent the time thinking about himself. Normally he would have taken the subway back uptown to his place on the Upper Eastside, but he still had Gunter's warning fresh in his mind.

By the time he reached his Park Avenue South condo overlooking Gramercy Park, two hours had passed and he was sweaty and his feet and calves were aching from pounding the pavement. Although in excellent shape, normally the only walking he did was on the treadmill at his gym. He rode glumly the elevator up to his apartment on the fourth floor and unlocked the door to his one bedroom apartment.

The first thing that hit his senses when he walked in the door was the smell of ripe garbage. The trashcan in the kitchen was full of rotting food, virtually all of it Rose's. She had the bad habit of ordering huge amounts of food at restaurants and take-out joints then eating only a small portion and throwing the rest away. Pizza, Thai, cheeseburgers, fried chicken, chocolate mousse, duck l'orange—it didn't matter. She'd take three, maybe four bites, that was it, then chuck it in the trash. The wastefulness of it all didn't really bother him so much as her unwillingness to haul the damned shit down the hall to the incinerator chute.

He went into the bedroom to get a fresh shirt out of his dresser. Rose was still passed out, face first, on his bed, her creamy white

buttocks pointed toward the ceiling. As he opened and shut his dresser drawers, she groaned and rolled over onto her back, placing her open palms over her eyes.

"Nnnnhhh. What time is it?" she yawned.

"It's still early. Go back to sleep. It's barely ten o'clock."

"Nnnhh." She opened sleep-swollen eyes and fixed him with a groggy stare. "Where were you?"

"I had trouble sleeping," he replied tersely. "I went out for a walk."

"Where'd you go?"

"Like I said, out." Brut peeled off his sweat-stained Armani T-shirt and replaced it with a freshly laundered Hugo Boss, tossing the soiled garment on the pile of dirty laundry at the foot of the bed. He left the bedroom and returned to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, scowling at its contents for a long moment before taking out a container of Dannon yogurt.

When he closed the refrigerator door, he saw Rose standing naked in the entrance to the kitchen. She was giving him that hungry grin again. She would get the same look whenever she would order a back of smoked ribs or a whole chicken. Normally that smile would make his cock start to twitch, but at that moment all it did for him was make his stomach knot up.

As he brushed past Rose, she moved to block his path, pressing her naked breasts against his upper arm. She fixed him with her best sultry sexpot smile—the one she used to sell designer label perfume—and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

"Not now, Rose," Brut said, maneuvering around her. He walked into the living room and plopped down on the sofa, staring sullenly at the blank television screen as he spooned yogurt into his mouth.

Rose sat down on the sofa beside him, leaning her body against his so that her chin rested on his shoulder. Her tongue flickered against the curve of his ear as one hand snaked across his chest and down between his legs.

Brut grimaced and jerked his head away from her probing tongue. "Jesus, Rose! I said 'not now', okay?"

The look of playful lust quickly disappeared from her face, to be replaced by suspicion. "What's wrong with you, Brut?"

"Who said anything was wrong?" he replied, shifting about uncomfortably in his seat. "I just want some time to myself without you climbing all over me like a goddamn jungle gym. Is that too much to ask?"

"Sounds like you're going queer on me all of a sudden," Rose snapped back at him, her emerald eyes flashing with anger.

Brut stood up and his handsome features suddenly contorted into a mask of rage. "Shut your fucking mouth!"

The corners of Rose's pink little rosebud mouth curled upward. If there was anything she hated more than anything, it was being ignored. If she couldn't get his undivided attention with sex, she was just as willing to start an argument. Either way, he was noticing her.

"Make me, *faggot*!" She spat the word out like it was a bug that had flown into her mouth.

Brut hurled his half-eaten yogurt at the wall and spun around to snatch Rose by the shoulders, yanking her roughly to her feet. Rose's glee at having scored a point against him turned quickly into alarm as she saw the look on his face.

"What did you call me?" The cords on his neck were standing out and his eyes were showing too much white.

"Brut, let go of me!" His fingers were biting deep into the flesh of her upper arms, but she was unwilling to try and break free of his grip for fear of bruising.

His eyes suddenly regained their focus and the anger knotting his face disappeared. He looked at her for a long moment, as if trying to remember something, then pushed her away from him. She stumbled backward and fell gracelessly onto the sofa behind her.

"Screw you, bitch," he snarled. "Maybe I'd be more interested if your ass wasn't so damn fat."

Brut openly smirked at the look of shock and hurt in her eyes.

That's right bitch, he thought. You're not the only one around here who can push buttons.

Sobbing, Rose leapt to her feet and ran past Brut into the bathroom. She slammed the door behind her, locking it from the inside. She opened the medicine cabinet over the sink, weeping hysterically as she searched its contents blindly until she found what

she so desperately needed: chocolate flavored laxative. Her hands trembled as she peeled away the foil wrapper and shoved the entire waxy-tasting bar into her mouth.

She stared at herself in the mirror as she chewed, brown-colored saliva leaking from the corner of her mouth like tobacco juice. Her tears had made her eyes red and swollen, not unlike how she looked after one of her binges, where she would wolf down enormous amounts of food and go throw it back up. She stepped over to the bathroom scale next to the toilet and stared at the LCD between her bare feet.

One hundred and ten pounds! Brut was right. She *was* fat.

The five foot eight model jumped off the scale as if it were made of live coals, a panicked look on her face. She'd gained three pounds. And she had that Lancôme shoot coming up in a few days. She started pulling nervously on her long, coppery hair. She felt her chest grow tight, followed by the familiar, anxious buzzing in the back of her head again—the high-pitched, waspy sniping that sounded so much like her mother's voice.

You're a fat cow.

You're jiggling like jello.

No one will ever want you.

You don't deserve to eat.

She had always been a high achiever. She was the girl the high school annual called "most likely to succeed". No one was surprised that she managed to land a modeling contract at the age of sixteen. People always told her how lucky she was to be so beautiful, but her view of herself was always in terms of what she wasn't, instead of what she was or could be. She was fairly confident that no one suspected she was bulimic, and had been so since she was fourteen. The only person she had trusted enough to confide in had been Merlot, and now she was gone. As for everyone else, she had become expert at covering up the signs of her eating disorder. Whenever her eyes were swollen, and her face flushed after a meal, she would blame it on her contact lenses or allergies. If she were caught in the act of vomiting, she would simply explain it as the result of food

allergies. At last count she claimed to be allergic to fish, chocolate, cheese and gluten.

The bulimia started around junior high, but her preoccupation with weight started long before that. Actually, the obsession with her weight started out as her mother's problem, not her own.

When Rose was a little girl, she was a tomboy, unafraid to climb and jump and explore the world she lived in. She had no fear, no inhibitions. No goal seemed impossible, no dream unattainable. Then she started elementary school and her mother decided it was inappropriate for a girl her age to be getting into so much mischief, and behaving in such an undignified manner. Her mother was a housewife, married to a successful executive. She had been an up and coming businesswoman when she first met Rose's father, but put all that aside in favor of helping his career and starting a family.

She was a smaller woman, and constantly worried about how her weight and appearance reflected on her husband and her marriage. Her parents went to a lot of business functions where the top executives' wives competed with one another in regard to their clothing and hairstyles.

Her mother's need to maintain the outward façade of physical perfection did not end with her physical self; it extended to her household and children as well. Especially Rose. Her mother's determination to make sure her only daughter met her rigorous standards for upholding the family's expectations took the form of severe criticism, much of it delivered in public.

When Rose was seven years old she went with her mother to the mall to buy clothes for the coming school year. When she came out of the changing room, her mother scowled at the skirt she was wearing.

"Look at your thighs!" she said sharply, in a voice loud enough for everyone else in the store to hear. "You're such a pretty girl, Rosemary. You shouldn't be walking around with thighs like that."

Later that same night, as the family gathered around the dinner table, her mother watched every time her fork went from the plate to her mouth, counting out how many times she ate. Halfway through the meal she suddenly blurted out: "You must really be hungry to have another spoonful of rice."

Rose's utensil froze halfway to her mouth. She looked first at her mother, who was staring a hole in her with her eyes, then to her father, who had stopped eating to see what was going on. Her hand started to quiver. It was then that she experienced her chest getting tight and the buzzing in the back of her head for the first time. After a long moment, she put her fork back down on the plate.

For the rest of the time she lived at home, Rose felt as if she was constantly under her mother's watchful, hypercritical eye. Every meal was parceled out to her as if she was an orphan in a Charles Dickens novel. Being home meant always feeling hungry and leaving the table unsatisfied. The only time she felt free to eat was at school and elsewhere, where her mother was nowhere around.

However, her hunger was often so ravenous, and her window of opportunity so short, she would often gorge on forbidden foodstuffs. Her secret eating did not go unnoticed, however. When she was nine years old her mother started forcing her to weigh herself in front of her every morning. The slightest unnecessary increase in her weight, or at least what her mother deemed as unnecessary, was quickly greeted with verbal abuse and even tighter dietary restrictions at home.

One of Rose's worst childhood memories was the time her mother invited the entire family over for Thanksgiving dinner and doled out a meager half-cup of dressing, a single teaspoon of mashed potatoes, and a slice of turkey breast so thin you could read a newspaper through, all the while admonishing her for having gained half a pound the day before.

As much as she tried, she discovered she couldn't live on nothing but rice cakes, cottage cheese, and steamed broccoli. She began seriously craving forbidden foods such as cake and cookies. But the minute a snack passed her lips, the buzzing would start in the back of her head.

How can you do this, you pig?

You're throwing everything away because you're lazy and you have no self-control!

That was when she started inducing vomiting. It was the only way she could relieve the anxiety of eating food that she actually *wanted*

to eat.

By the time she was twelve years old, food had become focus of her young life. It occupied every moment of her waking thoughts, and haunted her in her dreams. It was a love/hate relationship. She viewed it both as the enemy and her secret lover, being both the source of fear, anxiety and self-loathing, as well as a means of assuaging her pain and insecurity. Her childhood, what there was of it, was totally influenced by her twisted relationship with food.

The summer she turned twelve her parents sent her away to a Girl Scout camp in the mountains. It was a very nice camp as such things go. They had canoeing, horseback riding, arts and crafts, nature hikes, horseshoe pits, evening sing-alongs in front of the communal fire pit, and an Olympic-sized swimming pool. It was a great place for a kid to be a kid. However, Rose spent the entire time she was at summer camp worrying about her calorific intake, since she had no control over what food was served at the mess hall. Instead of sitting around the campfire, singing songs and playing horseshoes with her new friends, she spent almost all her spare time hunched over the toilet with her fingers down her throat. When her parents came to pick her up, she met them with swollen eyes, her skin covered with tiny red spots from where the blood vessels had broken under the pressure of so much vomiting. She explained her appearance as the result of exposure to poison ivy.

Soon after her thirteenth birthday, Rose's father left the family to start a new life with another woman—one that was not only older than her mother, but a successful businessperson with what could best be called a voluptuous figure. Her mother's response to the situation was a meltdown that would have done Chernobyl justice. Thirteen is no picnic, even if your family isn't falling apart at the seams. Junior high school was a nightmare. Everything about her and around her was changing so rapidly. Suddenly she had emotions she'd never felt before, body parts she'd never seen before, and all she wanted was someone to help her figure it all out. But her father wasn't around anymore, her older brother was away at college and her mother was of absolutely no use whatsoever.

The woman who had been a dietary drill sergeant, who had counted every calorie and measured every morsel of food she put on her daughter's plate was now little more than a zombie, shuffling about the house in a drab housecoat, her hair up in curlers all day, zoned out on Prozac and Xanax.

Rose began alternating between starving herself and binging. This would take the form of her spending weeks adhering to some fad diet or another, where she would lose a great deal of weight by eating only sauerkraut or living off of carrot juice and iceberg lettuce, followed by a couple of days of orgiastic feasting, most of it being junk food. She would eat entire boxes of Suzie-Qs, chocolate fudge Pop Tarts, and Dove ice cream bars, all in a single sitting, until her gut was so full it hurt to take a deep breath. Then, after having gorged as much as she could, she would force herself to vomit. After she'd spewed forth the partially digested contents of her stomach, she would dose herself with laxatives.

All the while this was going on, she was going to school, trying out for the cheerleader squad, attending mixer dances and all the other things normal American girls do as they developed into young women. Given her innate good looks, it wasn't surprising that she made cheerleader in her freshman year of high school.

That same year her school's cheerleading squad was tapped by the American Cheerleading Association to participate in their annual calendar, which helped raise funds so underprivileged students could attend cheerleader camps. Rose didn't really think that much about it, until a few weeks after the calendar hit the stores and her school got a call from the Pier Merlot agency, requesting the name and contact information for the red-headed cheerleader.

When Merlot's talent scout appeared on her doorstep, it was the biggest change in her young life since her father left. It also seemed to stir her mother from her depressive stupor, and soon she was back to her old self, obsessively weighing the family's meals as if they all lived on the verge of turning into Macy's Thanksgiving parade balloons.

Merlot flew Rose, along with her mother, up to New York for a weekend. They stayed in a swanky midtown hotel, and Merlot sent

Rose's mother to spend the day at a spa while she had a "nice long talk" with the daughter.

The first thing Merlot said to her, after studying her for a long moment, was; "How long have you had an eating disorder?"

Rose's cheeks turned bright red as if she'd been slapped. "I... I don't know what you mean."

"How long have you been bulimic? Don't lie to me again, Rose. I'm not a fool, and I resent being treated like your mother. I can see your teeth. The enamel has been damaged by repeated exposure to stomach acids. Plus, there's the telltale sign." She pointed to Rose's right hand, the top of which had a blister just below the knuckle of the index finger. "Nearly all bulimics have a chronic blister in the exact same spot from where their fingers rub against the upper teeth."

"I guess I've been doing it almost four years now. Does that mean I can't be a model?"

"Heavens, no!" Merlot said with a laugh. "If bulimia disqualified a person from being a model, there wouldn't be any left. However, taken to extremes, it can wreck your looks. We can get those teeth of yours capped—that's not a problem. But strenuous vomiting can rupture capillaries in the eyes and the facial skin. That's not good for business. However, I can help you, my dear. I've devised a method of containing the need to binge. And if you don't binge, there's no need to purge, is there?"

Merlot was as good as her word, and within a few weeks Rose found herself undergoing oral surgery and being primed for a career in front of the cameras. She also taught Rose how to defeat the urge to gorge on "forbidden" foods. The solution was actually quite simple: instead of denying herself the foods she craved and forcing herself to adhere to strict diets where she was supposed to eat nothing but cabbage soup or grapefruit, Rose was allowed her to eat anything she wanted—provided she only took three bites. At first Rose was unaccustomed to acknowledging her appetite. In her mind it was not unlike masturbating in public, but she soon grew accustomed to walking into a restaurant, ordering a huge meal, taking three bites of everything on the plate, and walking away from

the rest. For the first time it felt like she was almost in control of the forces that had been driving her all her young life.

Despite protests from her mother, she dropped out of high school during her junior year in order to pursue her modeling career full-time. She had always been driven to succeed, even as a small child. She always had to be the best, the first, the most popular. She knew she had the energy and talent to be whatever she wanted to be. And she was willing to do whatever it took to get whatever, or whoever, she wanted. But her burning need to be the best was constantly haunted by shadows of fear and guilt. On one hand, when she was posing for photographers or strutting down the catwalks, dressed in next year's fashions from the top designers, she felt free and invincible, like she had been when she was a child. But, once the cameras were put away and the footlights of the catwalk were extinguished, she was wracked by worry, fearful that she was incapable of doing anything without screwing up big time. Despite her having a thriving career and hordes of handsome young men and rich older ones falling all over themselves to try and get her attention, she was still a very unhappy woman.

The anxiety that had once found an outlet through her bulimia had recently discovered a new means of expressing itself: plastic surgery. Over the last year and a half she had liposuction, breast augmentation and a nose job. Whenever she felt overwhelmed by her situation, she would become convinced that all she needed was a little change in appearance to make things better. A nip here, a tuck there. What harm could it do? After all, everyone in the business did it, whether they admitted it or not. And, of course, her mother wholeheartedly approved of the procedures. Why shouldn't she? She'd had a boob job, a tummy-tuck and a butt lift after the divorce.

Yes, of course. That was it! It was almost as if a light bulb had come on over her head. Rose wiped the brown residue from her lips with the back of her hand. She unlocked the bathroom door and cautiously peered outside. She didn't see or hear any sign of Brut in the apartment. He'd probably gone back out again, surrendering the apartment to her. As he usually did whenever they had a fight.

She stepped out of the bathroom and hurried into the bedroom, where she found her cellphone sitting on top of the dresser. The phone on the other end rang a couple of times, then a woman's voice answered her manner professionally polite.

"Dr Shapiro's office, may I help you?"

"Hello, Millicent? This is Rose."

The receptionist's voice warmed slightly. "Oh, hello, dear. What can we do for you? Would you like to make an appointment?"

"Well, I was wondering if Georgie could do me a big favor. I have an important shoot coming up in a couple of weeks and I need some lipo."

"I don't know. That's awful short notice. You know you're not supposed to have anything to eat or drink a good twelve hours before coming into the office."

"I just got out of bed, Millicent. I swear I haven't had any coffee or even a glass of water."

"What about food?"

"Not really. Look, I don't need much done. Just a couple of pounds. Pleeeease, Millicent? He must have an open spot *somewhere* on his calendar?"

"Well, let me look." Rose could hear the other woman paging through the oversized day planner she kept on her desk. "Wait a minute... Yes, we do have a cancellation. It's for later today, toward the end of the day. Around four o'clock. Is that good for you?"

"Perfect!" Rose said, allowing herself a sigh of relief.

"Remember, you're not to eat anything before you come in. And no fluids, either."

"I understand." There was a loud gurgling sound, like that of a clog working free of a drain, from Rose's lower abdomen. The laxative bar was kicking in. "Look, I gotta go. I'll see you this afternoon. Once again, thanks, sweetie!"

Rose's guts gave a second, more insistent growl and she quickly hung up the phone and hurried back to the bathroom.

ELEVEN

Rose spent the rest of the day preparing for her surgery. She made a second call to Dr Shapiro's office and had Millicent call in to the pharmacy she used, renewing the prescriptions on file from her previous lipo procedure, which included Percoset for pain, Phenergan suppositories for nausea and Zithromax, an antibiotic. She also got some Peri Colace for constipation; after years of abusing laxatives, having a normal bowel movement was nearly impossible for her. And after abdominal surgery, straining to pass stool could prove dangerous.

She then called The Court, a boutique hotel located between Lexington and Park Avenue, less than five minutes from her surgeon's office, and booked a room for the next week. It was a small hotel, but with first class accommodations and an extremely attentive staff. She had stayed there following her last two surgeries. She packed a suitcase, complete with several changes of clothes, all her pills, tissue, a hairbrush, facial lotion, antibacterial soap, baby wipes, a nail file, chap stick, water-less shampoo, and a make-up bag complete with lipstick, foundation make-up, eyeliner and shadow. She then took a cab over to the hotel and checked into her room.

As she made herself at home in the hotel room, she debated about calling Brut on his cell and informing him of what she was doing, but decided against it. He had been acting very strange lately and she sensed that he would not approve of her going back to Dr Shapiro's so soon. Well, screw him; it was her body. So what if he didn't approve? Still, she wasn't in the mood to argue with him about it, especially after the fight they'd had that morning.

By the time the limo came around to pick her up for her appointment, she was feeling very thirsty. Knowing she wasn't allowed to drink seemed to make her even more parched. There was something about knowing certain things were forbidden to her that made her obsess about wanting to do it, whether it was food, drink, or sex.

Dr Shapiro's office was located on the fourteenth floor of a medical arts complex on Park Avenue. Actually it was the thirteenth floor, but the numeric display on the elevator said "fourteen" and all the doors on the floor were numbered accordingly as well, as if somehow refusing to acknowledge it was the thirteenth floor somehow removed any bad luck.

Rose exited the elevator, dressed down in a pair of DKNY jeans, an APC peasant blouse, and a pair of Hilfiger ballet flats, along with a pair of oversized Fendi shades, in case anyone might recognize her coming in and out of the office. Although everyone in the business had work done, it was still considered bad form to advertise the fact. Advertisers wanted the consumers to believe that it was their products, not a surgeon's scalpel, which made her face so beautiful.

It was fairly late in the day as she strolled into Dr Shapiro's office, a virtual temple to plastic surgery. All pale wood and frosted glass. A sculpture of a female figure emerging from a frozen lake stood in one corner of the luxurious waiting room. The only other flesh and blood woman in the room was a patient whose face was obscured behind the magazine she was reading, but Rose was impressed by what she could see of her wardrobe, which included a seersucker Kors cotton blazer, matching pair of bell bottom pants by Mizrahi and a pair of leather sling back wooden clogs by Marni.

"You're a bit early, Rose," Millicent said, smiling at her from her place behind the receptionist's window. "Take a seat. Dr Shapiro will be with you shortly."

The moment Rose sat down the woman in the seersucker suit lowered her magazine and looked at her. Rose felt her breath hitch in her throat as she saw the face seated opposite her. Or, rather, the mask hiding the face.

"Rose? Is that you?"

"Sherry?" Rose looked around nervously, even though she knew there was no one around to see. "What are you doing here?"

"I booked a consult with Dr Shapiro earlier this week. I remember you saying he was one of the best in the business. Although I almost cancelled my appointment for today, on account of Chardonnay."

Rose frowned. "What about her?"

Although Sherry's mask remained immobile, her voice indicated surprise. "You haven't heard? Brut didn't tell you?"

Rose bristled upon hearing Sherry mention Brut's name. What was the freak-faced bitch intimating? That Brut wasn't as close to her as he'd been with Sherry? Her cheeks flushed bright pink as she responded. "No. I haven't, um, seen him today. I've been busy."

"Really?" It was clear from Sherry's tone of voice she didn't believe a word Rose said. "That's funny. It's been all over the news."

"I don't pay any attention to the papers, and I don't watch the news," Rose said matter-of-factly, with the slight suggestion in her voice that anyone who didn't share her same opinion was dreadfully uncool. "So what's wrong? Is she hurt?"

"She's dead, Rose."

Rose blinked behind her Fendis, taken aback by the news. "What happened?"

Sherry shrugged and looked down at her hands resting in her lap, the fingers of which were knotted together like mating snakes. "I'm not sure. The papers said something about accidental drowning."

Rose sat there for a moment, nodding her head in silence, as she tried to come up with an appropriate response. She had never really liked Chardonnay. She was always running off and tattling to Sherry on what she and Brut were doing. Not because she was such a good friend of Sherry's and was outraged by their fooling around every time her back was turned, but simply because the lesbo was looking for a way into Sherry's pants. Finally she decided on simply stating the obvious. "Wow. That's so weird."

"Yeah. It is, isn't it?" Sherry agreed.

The receptionist stepped out from behind her desk and smiled at Rose. "Dr Shapiro is ready to see you now."

Rose stood up and followed Millicent down the corridor toward the back of the office, where the plastic surgeon kept his in-office operating suite, relieved to be excused from any further awkward conversation with her lover's former girlfriend.

Still, she wasn't sure as to how to feel about the news of Chardonnay's death. To tell the truth, Rose hadn't been terribly upset by the recent deaths of any of her friends. Well, calling them

"friends" was a bit of a stretch, really. They were more like people she knew. None of them had ever been that friendly to her. She had been the last addition to Merlot's cherished Cellar and the others had known each other for a year or two before she arrived. As it was, she suspected the reason the others, especially Sherry, had always been so standoffish was because they resented her talent and were threatened by her beauty.

Rose followed Millicent into one of the examination rooms, where she was given some pills, including a sedative and an antibiotic, washed down by a thimblefull of water.

"Go ahead and get undressed," Millicent said. "You can put your clothes in the drawer over there." She pointed to a small chest of drawers in the corner. "Dr Shapiro will be in to see you shortly. You can sit on the exam table once you've disrobed."

Rose did as she was told, stripping down to the skin and folding her clothes neatly and stowing them away in the drawers. She then hopped up onto the table, the layer of protective paper covering its surface crunching under her ass.

Rose was halfway through counting the number of cotton balls in the jar sitting on the counter when Dr Shapiro entered the room. He was a tall, distinguished gentleman in his early fifties, with salt and pepper hair and impressively even teeth. He was dressed in pale green surgical scrubs, his stethoscope coiled about his neck like a pet snake.

"Good afternoon, Rose. How are you feeling today?"

"Fat."

Shapiro raised an eyebrow and nodded, jotting something down on the charts attached to the clipboard he was carrying. "You do realize that what we're about to do is highly unorthodox, do you not? Normally I require my patients to prepare at least twenty-four hours in advance before a surgery."

"I know," Rose replied. "I've signed all the waivers."

Shapiro nodded again and jotted something further onto the charts. "So, where do you want the lipo and how much do you want done?"

"I need a couple pounds out of my belly and a couple taken out of my butt."

Shapiro fixed her with a long, thoughtful look, staring at her naked body much the same way a butcher studies the carcass of a cow before slicing it into various types of steak. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather go to the gym?"

Rose's eyes flashed green hell at her doctor. "I already go to the gym five times a week. It's clearly not getting rid of it. I want the procedure."

"Of course, of course," he said, quickly backpedaling. "I just wanted you to be aware of all your options. I know you are artistic and aesthetically attuned as to what you want to look like. After all, it's my job to help you be happy with how you look."

"Oh, and another thing—don't pump me so full of that fluid like you did last time. I was bloated for over a week!"

The doctor frowned. "Are you sure that's what you want, Rose? The super-wet technique guarantees far less bleeding and bruising in the long run."

"I've got a shoot in two weeks. They'll mostly be focusing on my face, and I won't be wearing a swimsuit, so I'm not worried about the bruises showing. I can't look blown up like a damn pool toy, though."

Dr Shapiro sighed as he removed a black grease pencil from his breast pocket, uncapped it and motioned for Rose to stand up. He then quickly drew circles and arrows on her abdomen and the cheeks of her ass, like a high school coach sketching out the game plans in a football play book. He then took a step back, nodding his head, and recapped his writing utensil.

"That should do it. I'll have Millicent come in and take the 'before' pictures." Halfway out the door, he paused and turned around to fix her with a quizzical look. "Oh, by the way, didn't you know that model?"

Rose crossed her arms in front of her breasts, suddenly uncomfortably aware that she was naked, "What model?"

"The one that died recently."

"Which one? I know more than one that died this week."

Dr Shapiro raised an eyebrow but said nothing else, closing the door behind him. A couple of minutes later, the receptionist reappeared, this time carrying a digital camera. Rose stood against the wall of the exam room arms outstretched, and presented first her front, then her back to be photographed.

"Perfect," Millicent said with a smile. "Now put these on." She handed Rose a pair of powder-blue paper booties to cover her bare feet, and a larger bag for her hair. "Now put on your gown and paper hairnet and booties," she pointed to a shapeless blue gingham print smock hanging from a hook next to the door. "I'll escort you to the OR."

Rose nodded her understanding, as she changed into her gown. By the time she followed Shapiro's receptionist back to the surgical suite, she could feel the sedative she had taken start to kick in. It felt as if her elbows and knees had suddenly turned to something far heavier than mere bone and her eyes were beginning to lose their ability to focus.

The surgical suite was slightly larger than one of the examination rooms, with an operating table, and a powerful overhead light source similar to a spotlight that was mounted on a pivot that allowed the surgeon to point it wherever he needed it to go. There were several trays of sterile surgical implements, sutures and gauze arrayed on a portable table, along with a general anesthesia machine and a vacuum pump.

Rose was met by Dr Shapiro's nurse, an older woman who handled the anesthesia and assisted him during procedures.

"Come on, hop up," the nurse said, patting the surface of the operating table.

Rose did as she was told, stretching herself out atop the long white table. As she stared at the light glinting off the cold, surgical steel surfaces of the instruments on the tray beside her, she remembered something Gunter had said the other day, at Shiraz's funeral.

What was it? Something about *Charlie's Angels*? No, that wasn't it. Was it Todd's Angle?

Suddenly Rose felt a flicker of fear, accompanied by the desire to call the whole thing off.

Dr Shapiro's nurse loomed over her, the lower part of her face obscured by his pale green surgical mask. She held a black rubber anesthesia mask in one hand. "The doctor wanted me to tell you that he's decided to place you under general anesthesia for today's procedure. Let me know when you're ready, okay?"

The tickle of fear in the back of Rose's mind was growing into genuine misapprehension. There was still time for her to back out, put on her clothes and go home.

Just as Rose was about to tell the nurse she had changed her mind, she felt a tightness in chest accompanied by a buzzing in the back of her head.

What are you afraid of? Looking good?

No wonder Brut isn't interested in sex with you!

What a big, fat, sloppy sow you are!

Rose closed her eyes and took a deep breath, doing her best to control the snarling, sniping voice inside her head.

"Okay. I'm ready."

The nurse nodded and lowered the anesthesia mask, placing it so that it fit snugly over Rose's nose and mouth.

"Rose, can you hear me? I need you to count backward, starting at one hundred," the nurse said as she moved over to the anesthesia machine.

Rose nodded that she understood and began to count down as the nurse made the adjustments that controlled the amount of nitrous oxide to oxygen being fed into the anesthesia line.

"One hundred..." she said, her voice muffled by the mask. "Ninety-nine... Ninety-eight... Nineyseven... Niney-siccccccks... Niney... four..."

The nurse looked up from the controls and nodded to Dr Shapiro, who had just entered the surgical suite, hands freshly gloved, his elbows still dripping from the scrub basin.

"She's under, doctor."

The plastic surgeon went to the operating table and peeled back one of Rose's upper lids, revealing an eye rolled back in its socket. He then motioned for the nurse to remove the patient's gown.

"Let's get this over with," he said, his voice sounding far less chipper than it had when he was talking to Rose in the exam room. "It's been a long day."

Having removed Rose's gown, the nurse expertly swabbed down the model's exposed abdomen with an antiseptic wash that left the area stained orangish-red. Dr Shapiro picked up one of the scalpels on the tray next to his elbow and made two small incisions, about a fourth of an inch long, just above her pubic hair, then flushed the targeted area with a syringe filled with a solution composed of lidocaine, saline, and epinephrine, which was designed to constrict the blood vessels and reduce the amount of bleeding during surgery. Normally he would use over a cc of solution per cc of fat to be aspirated, but due to the patient's request, he was using a third of what he usually would.

Satisfied the patient was responding well and still unconscious, he then took the eighteen inch metal hollow tube cannula and pushed it under the skin of Rose's abdomen. He had to do this by touch, because he couldn't actually see where the cannula went. In a way it was not unlike working through a keyhole. With surprisingly energetic sawing movements, he slid the quarter inch thick tube in and out, creating tunnels in the fat layer. He would have to repeat the forceful motions many times in the next ninety minutes.

There was a wet, gargling sound as the mixture of broken-up fat, blood and other bodily fluids was suctioned through the cannula, then through a long flexible plastic tube that attached the cannula to a vacuum pump. A second later a yellowish-pink fluid squirted into the clear plastic receptacle affixed to the pump.

To the casual observer, it would have appeared that everything was going along fine, just like the five hundred other lipoplasties Dr Shapiro had performed in his office that year. But unlike the result of plastic surgery, appearances aren't everything.

What Rose, or any of Dr Shapiro's wealthy uptown clientele, didn't know was that the good doctor, who charged anywhere from three to fifteen thousand dollars cash for his services, did not have the latest in medical equipment in his operating room.

For example, the anesthesia machine he used on almost all his patients was an obsolete model that was no longer up to code. He had acquired the machine from a hospital he once worked at, fifteen years earlier, when they went through updating their OR equipment. Nor had he spent a single cent in the last four years to maintain or service the equipment. After all, he had greens fees to think of, as well as paying for his son's junior year at Tufts University, not to mention the new M-Class Benz his wife was so hot on.

As Dr Shapiro was busy first prepping his patient for surgery, then working to remove the handful of fat she was determined to rid herself of, he and his nurse were unaware that the tube that fed the nitrous oxide into the anesthesia line had sprung a leak. The telltale hiss that would have alerted Dr Shapiro or his nurse to the situation was drowned out by the far louder hiss and gurgle of the vacuum pump attached to the cannula.

The first visible sign that there was a problem was when the nurse, who was sitting on a stool at the head of the table, stationed between Rose and the anesthesia machine, suddenly slipped off her seat and onto the floor, taking the anesthesia mask with her as she fell.

Shapiro froze, dumbstruck, and stared at his nurse, who lay sprawled on the operating room floor. "Nurse Dahmer?"

The nurse remained immobile and gave no sign of having heard him.

"Frieda?"

Sweat was pouring off his brow and into his eyes. He blinked rapidly, suddenly aware of how hard it was for him to keep his vision in focus. He'd been feeling tired for a few minutes, but simply ascribed his weariness to it being close to the end of the day. By the time he realized something was wrong, it was too late. Dr Shapiro stepped backward from the operating table, his eyes rolling back in their sockets, and collapsed onto the floor alongside his unconscious nurse, leaving the liposuction cannula still inside Rose's abdomen with the vacuum pump still running.

Rose was waiting to be seated at Giallo's, her favorite restaurant in the whole city. She loved their pasta dishes, especially their cannelloni and pasta. But what she liked the most about the restaurant was the huge mirror that ran the length of the dining room wall, which allowed diners the benefit of seeing who else might be feasting there that night without having to be so gauche as to actually turn their head. The restaurant's décor was elegant and, in keeping with the name of the establishment, outfitted in some shade of yellow throughout, from the blanched almond tablecloth to the citrine chandelier.

The maître d' appeared at her elbow as if summoned by magic. He was an older African-American gentleman dressed in a conservative gray suit and with a long face and eyes the color of smoke. "Good evening, signora," he said, smiling widely, his teeth surprisingly white and strong. "Will you be joining the other ladies for dinner?"

Rose frowned. "What other ladies?"

The maître d' turned slightly, so that she could have an unobstructed view of the dining room, and pointed to a nearby table. Four women were seated together, drinking and laughing amongst themselves. As she looked in their direction they turned as one to wave at her. With a small shock of surprise, she realized she knew each and every one of them.

"There she is!" Merlot said with a throaty laugh, hoisting a Martini glass in one hand and her trademark cigarette holder in the other.

"Come sit with us!" Shiraz said with a smile, patting the empty seat next to her.

"Where have you been, Rose?" Chablis asked, sipping champagne from a crystal flute.

"Yeah, what's kept you so long?" Chardonnay asked. "We've been waiting for you."

Rose hesitated, uncertain as to what she should do. She really didn't want to sit with Merlot and the others. After all, they were dead, even though they seemed unaware of that. Rose looked around the dining room, hoping to find an excuse not to join them, but the rest of the tables were empty. It would be impossible to decline their offer and not come across looking like a total stuck-up bitch.

Although it made her feel very uneasy, she went and sat down at the table, in between Shiraz and Merlot.

"What's the matter, my dear?" Merlot asked as she sipped her apple Martini. "You look surprised to see us."

"Yeah, well, I guess I am," she admitted.

"How come?" Chardonnay asked as she idly stirred her old fashioned with a tiny red drink straw.

"Well... I never expected to see any of you again."

"Why's that?" Shiraz asked.

"Because you're dead. All of you."

The four women fell silent and stared at Rose for a long moment, then exchanged looks with one another. They then burst into peals of wild, manic laughter.

"No, it's true," Rose insisted.

Chablis chortled, blood oozing from her mouth. When she opened her mouth to speak, Rose could see the severed stump that had once been her tongue. "Oh, please, Rose."

"Don't you think we would *know* if we were dead or not?" Chardonnay turned in her chair, revealing a shiny knob of bone jutting from her right shoulder in place of an arm.

"Yeah," Shiraz agreed. "Besides, do we *look* dead to you?" As she tossed her hair out of her face, there was a loud popping sound and her head suddenly dropped forward and rolled onto her chest.

"And even if we *are* dead, what's wrong with that?" Merlot asked. She took a deep drag on her cigarette holder, then coughed abruptly. Tiny crabs fell out of her mouth and dropped onto the tablecloth, only to quickly scuttle away. "That's the mark of a *true* celebrity—when people continue to talk about you long after you're dead. How will you know you're fabulous if you don't die?"

"This is crazy!" Rose exclaimed, getting to her feet. "None of you are real!"

"Oh, we're real alright, dearie," Merlot said, throwing a length of seaweed about her bloated, waterlogged neck as if it was a fine silk scarf from Milan. "As real as memory."

"Leave me alone!" Rose sobbed, backing away from the table. "I don't belong here with you!"

"I wouldn't be so sure of that, if I were you," Chardonnay sneered, pointing with her remaining hand at the mirrored wall behind Rose. "See for yourself."

Although she did not want to look, Rose felt compelled to turn and stare into the mirror. She told herself that whatever might be looking back at her was just an illusion, a trick of the eye. It was not real and could not harm her. Still, she could not help but gasp as she saw her reflection.

What stood before her in the mirror was a skeleton, completely devoid of skin, tissue, and muscle, save for the mane of long red hair and a pair of emerald green eyes lodged into the orbits of the skull. Rose lifted her hands to try and touch where her face should have been, but she had no skin or nerve endings to feel with even if she could.

"I think you look absolutely *gorgeous*. Frankly, there's no such thing as being *too thin*." As she laughed, seawater bubbled up her throat and gushed out of her mouth, splashing loudly onto the floor.

Rose found herself rising out of darkness into a gray, foggy light, the sound of Merlot's watery laughter still in her ears. Although her senses were still blurred by the anesthesia, she was aware that she was in pain—although her physical discomfort was immense, it was still being held at a distance by the painkillers the doctor had pumped into her. Once they wore off, the pain would descend upon her like the fist of an angry god. But until then, she was aware of its existence without being overpowered by it, like a Kansas farmer standing in his field watching a distant tornado bearing down upon his home.

As she lay there on the table, she became aware of two sounds. The first was a loud, mechanical noise, like that of an air pump. The second was the sound of something wet splashing onto the floor. She turned her head to one side and saw the Medivac secretion aspirator Dr Shapiro used for his liposuction procedures. The two liter jar that served as the catch basin for the suctioned out fat was not only full,

but overflowing. The splashing sound she'd heard was her own body fat, blood and other fluids pouring out of the jar and onto the floor of the operating room.

The sight of her own blood on the floor, along with unidentifiable pieces of tissue, jolted Rose out of her stupor. She tried to sit up, but her arms and legs would not obey her. The best she could do was lift her head and stare down at her body. What she saw made her heart swell with terror until it felt like it would burst inside her chest.

Rose could see the long, metal liposuction wand jutting out of her midsection like a meat thermometer rammed into a turkey. The cannula had sucked not only the unwanted fat from her abdomen, but also much of the muscle and connective tissue underneath as well. Her skin hung from her belly in lumpy folds like that of an elephant, and the front of her stomach seemed to touch her spine. For one brief moment, Rose had a mental image of herself as the Scarecrow from *The Wizard Of Oz*, after the flying monkeys had torn him apart, leaving him only as a living torso.

She opened her mouth to scream, but the best she could do was a strangled moan before succumbed to unconsciousness. As she slipped into the darkness pooled in the back of her head, she could hear the beat of wings, and she realized the flying monkeys had returned to carry her away, once and for all.

Millicent glanced up from her copy of *Elle* as the blonde woman in the seersucker pantsuit put aside her own magazine and abruptly got to her feet.

The woman had been sitting very patiently in the reception area for well over an hour, waiting for Dr Shapiro to finish with his last surgery for the day. She did not have an appointment, and normally the doctor didn't do consults on those days scheduled for office surgery, but given the obvious seriousness of the stranger's deformity, he had made an exception.

"Is something wrong, ma'am?" Millicent asked as the blonde picked up her purse and placed her arm through the arm strap.

"No. Nothing's wrong. I simply need to go now," the other woman replied, her voice muffled slightly by the strange mask covering her face.

"Would you like me to reschedule your consult with Dr Shapiro?" the receptionist asked, opening the office day planner.

"No. That won't be necessary," the masked woman said as she opened the door. "It seems I won't be needing his services after all."

TWELVE

"Excuse me, sir? Are you Gunter Nonhoff?"

Gunter looked up from his light meter at the two middle-aged men who had just entered his studio. It was early in the day, and he was busy getting his cameras ready for a commercial shoot later that afternoon for Tag Heuer. It was clear from their rumpled, off-the-rack suits and brown leather shoes that the men standing before him were not in the fashion business. One was lanky, possibly in his late fifties, if not older, with salt and pepper hair that looked like he'd used a tube of Brylcreem that morning. The second one was younger, in his late thirties, with surprisingly chiseled good looks, although with serious suitcases under his eyes.

As Gunter turned to face them, the older of the two produced a battered leather wallet from his breast pocket and flipped it open, revealing a NYPD shield.

"Ja, I am Gunter Nonhoff," the photographer replied warily. "What is this about, officers?"

The detectives exchanged looks and the good-looking cop spoke. "We're trying to locate a William Delbert Simms."

Gunter shook his head and started to turn his back on the cops. "Never heard of him. Now, if you don't mind, mein Herren, I have work to attend to..."

"Perhaps you know him by another name?" The younger cop flipped open a small spiralbound notebook he kept in his breast pocket. He squinted at his handwriting, as if unsure of what he was reading. "I believe he works under the name Brat—no, that's not it... Brute?"

Gunter turned back around to face the policemen, an alarmed look on his face. "What's happened to him?"

"I take it you know him, then?" the older cop said with a crooked smile.

"Yes. Yes, I know Brut. What happened to him? Where is he?"

"That's something we'd like to know ourselves, Mr Nonhoff."

A look of befuddlement crossed Gunter's face. "Has he done something?"

"No, sir. We just need to find him to make an identification. You see, this really isn't about him. It concerns his girlfriend, Rosemarie Dupree."

"Rose is dead." Gunter did not speak the words as a question, but as a statement of fact.

The cops exchanged glances once again, their interest piqued by the photographer's odd reaction to the news.

"Yes, sir. We're sorry to say that is the case."

Gunter leaned against the table on which his photographic gear was arranged, trying to keep his heart from leaping out of his chest. "How... how did she die?"

"We're not really at liberty to discuss that with anyone but Mr Simms, sir. But it should be sufficient to say that she met with an unfortunate accident. One that is currently being investigated by Homicide."

"I though you said it was an accident?"

"Yes, sir, I did. But it's Homicide's job to investigate unusual deaths to rule out the possibility of foul play. And Ms Dupree's death certainly qualifies."

"If you simply need someone to identify the body, I can do that for you. I photographed Rose scores, if not hundreds of times."

"Thank you for your offer, Mr Nonhoff, but regulations require that we try and utilize next of kin or a spouse, if possible. Ms Dupree listed Mr Simms on her medical paperwork as her next of kin. Do you know where we might find him, sir?"

"Did you go to his condo? He lives off Park Avenue South, near Gramercy."

"Yes, sir. We went there first, as it was also listed as Ms Dupree's domicile. We had the super let us in. He wasn't there, but we did find a notepad with your home address and phone number on it. We called your home looking for you, but your cleaning lady said you were at your studio and gave us your address."

"I think I know where he might be."

"Where is that?" The older cop asked as he fished a ballpoint pen out of his front pocket.

Gunter hesitated. Although he did not particularly like Brut, he was not comfortable with telling the police what he knew of the model's hobbies. "I'd rather not say. Look, if he's where I think he is, I'll bring him to wherever it is you need him to go."

The older cop shrugged and stepped forward, handing Gunter a business card. "That's the Medical Examiner's Office's address, over on First Avenue. Bring him there. They're open twentyfour/seven."

"I'll do that, officer," Gunter promised as he escorted the detective out of the studio.

Once he was satisfied the cops were gone, he called the models slated for the Tag Heuer shoot that afternoon and told them he needed to reschedule. He then called the housekeeper and told her that he would be getting home late that evening and under no circumstances was she to tell Cabby about the cops calling the house, should she telephone from her grandparents' place out on Cape Cod. He then walked over to the closet and got out a hooded sweatshirt and slipped it on, then, after a moment's consideration, he went to his desk and unlocked the drawer where he kept his gun.

Gunter had not been in the Bronx for some time and as he picked his way across the empty lot besides the shooting gallery, he was reminded why.

He headed toward the rear entrance of the building, passing the remnants of an air conditioner, a junked twenty-six inch television set turned on its side, plastic buckets half-full of stagnant rainwater and possibly less wholesome fluids, as well as broken boards pulled off the windows and doors of the abandoned six storey tenement. Upon reaching the door, he had to bend over to climb through the hole where the bottom panel had been kicked out. As he did so, his hand tightened around the Ruger pistol in the pocket of his hoodie. Had the cops shown up at his studio any later in the day, then Gunter probably would have simply told them where to find Brut and left it at that. This was certainly no place to be after dark.

Once he was inside, Gunter straightened up quickly and looked around. Slivers of light streamed into the darkened hallway from a

room to the right. Inside, scattered on the floor like jackstraws, were dozens upon dozens of used syringes, orange syringe caps, empty beer and pop cans, a broken commode laying on its side, potato chip bags, a plastic Big Gulp cup, Deer Spring water bottles, copious cigarette butts and numerous bloody tissues. The air was thick with the smell of urine and feces.

The floorboards overhead creaked and he could hear more than one person coughing and someone else retching in the shadows. As he moved toward the stairwell, he saw that the flight leading to the second floor was crowded with junkies. Everywhere he looked there was garbage, most of it human. They were squatting along the wall, huddled in a sort of crouch, too intent on finding a vein to do more than lean out of the way as he climbed over them. The junkies' total indifference to being trodden upon reminded him of the filthy droves of pigeons that filled Tompkins Square Park.

The worst of the ones cluttering the stairs looked like escapees from *Night of the Living Dead*, with gaunt faces and dank, grayish skin, regardless of their ethnicity. They were drenched in junk sweat, their hair caked with grease and filth, as they lay slumped senseless against the nearest upright surface.

Once Gunter reached the second floor, a tall, thin Hispanic with a pockmarked face seemed to materialize from the shadows at the top of the stairs. He said nothing but held up three fingers. Gunter nodded and handed him three dollars. The pockmarked man handed him a metal bottle cap, a cotton ball and a pack of matches, then stepped aside. Gunter stuffed the paraphernalia into his pocket and stepped over a man propped up against the doorway, his rolled-up sleeve revealing a forearm caked in blood. He had just paid the toll that would allow him to run up smack in the relative safety of one of the rooms in the shooting gallery. The junkies he had climbed over could not afford the three dollar "rent" and had to make do with the stairwell, which cost a dollar instead.

Gunter stepped into the front room, which faced the street and looked around. It was a good thing he was there to try and find Brut and not shoot up, because it was clear he had showed up too late to get a decent place to nod out. The best spots were against the walls,

even though they were caked with blood from squirting syringes, because they could lean back without falling over.

As the photographer looked around, he saw a white guy with long, filthy dreadlocks the color of stale urine roll up his trouser leg and inject himself in the calf. The meat of the man's leg was covered with weeping abscesses and scars that made him look like a human ashtray. Next to him a young woman in a spaghetti strap, Baby Doll tank top that read "Nashville Pussy" lifted her left arm over her head and expertly shot up into her exposed arm pit. Next to the wall, a man sat passed out on a red kitchen chair, his chin on his chest. A used syringe lay at his feet, while two more rested under the chair.

Gunter found Brut collapsed atop a badly stained and torn mattress in the far corner that smelled like it served double duty as a cat box. The male model was lying flat on his back, his eyes closed. For a moment Gunter was afraid he'd reached him too late, but then he saw one eyelid flicker partially open.

"Brut."

The second eyelid fluttered open. "Gu... Gunter?" It came out slow and slurred. "You really there, dude? Or am I tweaking?"

"I'm really here, Brut. Come on, you have to get out of here!"

"Why?"

Gunter looked around nervously and lowered his voice. "The cops are looking for you."

A look of befuddlement slowly slid across the younger man's face. "Me? Why?"

"It's Rose."

"What about the bitch?" Brut snarled, his handsome features quickly changing into something decidedly unpleasant.

Gunter had originally wanted to break the news to Brut as gently as possible, but the ugliness of the model's response made him change his mind at the last minute. Screw pulling his punches. "She's dead, Brut."

Brut was quiet for a moment, then he brought his hands to cover his face. Since he couldn't sit up, he curled into a fetal position. His chest heaved up and down. Gunter grimaced and cursed himself for being such a prick under his breath. He stepped forward and took the

model's hands and pulled him up off the floor until he was sitting upright. It seemed to take a lot out of Brut, so Gunter crouched down in front of him.

"Brut, you have get out of here. This isn't a safe a place even if Death wasn't breathing down your neck," he said in a harsh whisper.

Brut sniffed and rubbed his snotty nose on the sleeve of his Hilfiger jersey. "How... did she die?"

"I don't know. The cops wouldn't say. They just told me they need you to come identify the body. Make sure it's her."

Brut's face crumpled like a tissue paper rose. "But I don't wanna see her body, Gunter!"

"I know that, but you can't stay here, regardless of anything else. Come on, Brut. Stand up." Gunter put his right shoulder under Brut's left armpit, wrapping his arm behind the other man's back and levered him up off the dingy mattress.

As Gunter tried to maneuver Brut out the door, the pock-faced Hispanic reappeared, blocking the exit.

"Bro say he done wanna go, man."

Gunter met the drug dealer's gaze—the only unclouded eyes he'd seen since entering the hellhole—and spoke in a flat, clipped voice, trying hard not to sound either scared or intimidated. "Believe me, you don't want him here. The cops are looking for him."

The drug dealer's eyes flickered from Gunter to Brut. The photographer could almost see the other man's brain tabulating the risk/reward factors involved in keeping a good paying customer in his establishment versus having the law disrupt his business. The drug dealer nodded his understanding and stepped aside without further argument.

It took Gunter ten minutes to get Brut down the stairs and out the back door and another fifteen before he was able to hail a cab willing to stop and pick them up. As he loaded the male model into the back of the taxi, he realized there was no way he could take him to the Medical Examiner's Office in the state he was in. Brut was in no condition to identify his own left foot, much less his girlfriend's body. Instead, he gave his home address as the destination and could see

the hack's eyes light up in the rear-view mirror. At least it was going to be a good day for somebody.

"Motherfucker! Stop it!" Brut yelled, spitting out the cold water from the shower as it ran down his head, plastering his hair to his skull and into his mouth. The male model was standing in the shower/bath of the townhouse Gunter shared with Cabernet, still dressed as Gunter had found him in the shooting gallery, save for his expensive Italian leather belt, which he'd used to tie off and had probably been boosted by one of the junkies while he was on the nod.

"I'll stop it when you sober up, scheisskopf!" Gunter snarled, pushing Brut back under the showerhead as the model lunged forward.

"I'm not taking you somewhere crawling with cops while you're high as a damn kite!"

"What the hell are you talking about? Take me where? And why are my goddamned clothes still on? Jesus Christ, man. These are leather shoes. And you've ruined them."

Gunter gave Brut a hard look, but it was clear from the confused outrage on the other man's face that he did not remember anything that had happened before being shoved into the ice-cold shower.

"The cops need you to go downtown to identify Rose's body."

Brut's face went slack, as if all the muscles had been severed. It was a disconcerting sight, as if someone had suddenly pulled a plug out of a wall and what Gunter had assumed to be a living, breathing human was revealed to be nothing more than a collection of pulleys and gears. The only sign of life were his eyes, which flickered back and forth, as if he was watching a game of ping-pong. Then Brut took a deep breath and his facial muscles contorted into something that resembled the tragic mask of classical drama and he began to scream. However, the anguish he felt was not for his deceased girlfriend.

"Oh, God! I'm gonna die! I'm gonna die!"

"Calm down, Brut!"

"I don't wanna die, Gunter!" Brut lunged forward, grabbing the front of the photographer's shirt with both hands. "Don't let him get me!"

"Let who get you?"

"The old man."

"You mean Death?" Gunter asked, puzzled by the reference.

A look of startled surprise, as if he might have said too much, crossed Brut's face, but was quickly gone. "Yeah, that's what I meant. You won't let him get me, will you?"

"You know I can't promise you anything like that, Brut..."

"You're all the same!" The male model shouted, staggering back under the spray from the showerhead. "No one cares about me." He began to cry great, wracking sobs, but it was hard to tell if the water running down his face was actually tears.

"Damn it, stop sniveling," Gunter snarled, bitch-slapping Brut as hard as he could. He was sorely tempted to close his fist on the second pass, but refrained from doing so. "If you can't *be* a man, then shut the hell up and at least *act* like one!"

Brut cowered away from the photographer, pressing the flat of his hand against his bruised cheek, his eyes flashing both fear and anger, but stopped his histrionics.

"Let me make this perfectly clear, before we go any further. I find you to be a sniveling little shit, and under normal circumstances I couldn't care less if you overdosed or fell under a subway train, but for some ungodly reason you and I are trapped within the same nightmare. For that reason—and that reason only—I am willing to try and help you stay alive. But if you ever pull another dummkopf stunt like running off to the worst neighborhood in the city and sticking a spike of heroin in your arm, or leg or wherever the hell you choose to shoot up, putting not only yourself but anyone trying to find you in mortal danger, then you won't have to worry about the Grim Reaper coming to claim you, because I will kill you myself! Do you understand me?"

"Y-yes, sir," Brut stammered, his demeanor that of a very small child.

"Gut. Now strip down and clean yourself up. You should be able to wear my clothes. I'll be downstairs, making espresso. Once you're presentable, I'll see to it that you get to the Medical Examiner's."

As Gunter was pouring Brut his third cup of espresso, the kitchen phone rang. Upon picking it up, he heard Cabernet's voice on the line.

"Gunter? What the hell is going on down there?"

"What do you mean, liebchen?" Gunter was thankful she could not see the grimace on his face as he spoke.

"I'm talking about Chardonnay. It's all over the cable news. Why didn't you call me?"

"Darling, please understand I didn't want to upset you." He glanced over at Brut. "But I see now that it's no use. As it is, I have even more bad news."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid Rose is dead."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. When she finally spoke again, he was surprised at how composed she sounded. "How did it happen?"

"I don't know. I'm about to take Brut downtown so he can identify the body."

"He's actually there with you?"

"Yes. The cops came by my studio earlier today looking for him. That's how I found out about Rose being dead. I had to go drag him out of some shit hole in the south Bronx. I've been sobering him up for the last couple of hours."

"How is he taking the news?"

"I wouldn't exactly call him the Rock of Gibraltar."

"That settles it. I'm coming home."

"No, honey. Please don't." Gunter's grip on the receiver became a stranglehold.

"What are you talking about? Don't be silly, sweetheart. I was going to come back to the city for Chardonnay's funeral, no matter what. And now I have a double funeral to attend. I couldn't possibly stay up here. Besides, my due date is almost here, and my OB/GYN is in Manhattan. As much as I love Cape Cod, I have absolutely *no*

intention of giving birth to our baby up here. Don't worry, darling. I'll have my father drive me down to New York tomorrow. He drove in from Boston yesterday evening. I'm sure he won't mind."

Gunter sighed and nodded his head in resignation, even though she was not there to see it. "Very well, Liebling. I'll see you tomorrow then." He knew there was no arguing with Cabernet once her mind was made up about something. She could be a very stubborn woman at times, but that was one of the things that caused him to fall in love with her in the first place.

"Bye, honey. Tell Brut I'm sorry."

"Will do. Bye." With that, Gunter hung up the phone and turned back to face his houseguest, who was watching him with raw, red-rimmed eyes.

"Will do what?" the model asked.

"Stop at the grocery store to pick up some cinnamon ice cream. Cravings, you know. Come on. Get your shit together. It's time to go."

The New York City morgue was a four storey building on First Avenue and East Thirtieth, located in the basement of the Medical Examiner's Office and, as the cops had promised, was open twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Upon entering the reception area, they saw a deputy seated behind a large desk.

"May I help you?" the officer asked as they approached.

"My friend was asked to come identify a body," Gunter said helpfully, when it became apparent Brut was not going to speak.

"The deceased's name?" the deputy asked, opening a window on his desktop computer.

"Rose," Brut said abruptly, as if suddenly aware he was being spoken to.

"Last name?"

A befuddled look crossed Brut's face and Gunter had to restrain himself from smacking the model on the back of his surfer dude head.

"Dupree. Rosemarie Dupree," Gunter said, jumping in once again.

"Let me call and make sure the attendants have her prepped for identification. The boys down there try to clean them up before the family has to come in and ID them." The deputy picked up the phone

on his desk and punched a couple of buttons. "Hello? Morgue? I have someone here to identify a Rosemarie Dupree. Is she presentable? Okay, good. I'll send them right down." The deputy hung up and pointed toward a bank of elevators off the main lobby. "Take the elevator all the way to the sub-basement. There will be an attendant there to meet you."

Gunter thanked the officer and took Brut by the elbow and steered him toward the elevator. Two minutes later the doors opened to reveal an older man dressed in a rumpled white lab coat and pale blue doctor's scrubs. The strong smell of antiseptic radiated from him like cologne.

"Is one of you Mr, umm, Simms?" the morgue attendant asked, consulting the clipboard he held in one hand.

Brut stared past the morgue attendant toward the stainless steel swinging doors at the end of the hall. The sterile linoleum hallway of the morgue looked wet and needlessly clean. Gunter coughed into his fist and planted a firm elbow into the younger man's ribs.

Brut jumped as if startled and swallowed hard. "Yeah, that would be me."

"Come with me, please, sir."

Brut glanced nervously over his shoulder at Gunter. "Can he come with me?"

The morgue attendant shrugged. "I don't see why not."

The three of them headed down the hall and through the swinging doors into a large room dominated by a huge refrigerator with banks of stainless steel doors. For a moment Gunter was reminded of his kitchen. Two autopsy rooms were on the left side of the morgue, each with a porthole situated at average eye-level. The morgue attendant double-checked his chart again and walked over to the cooler door marked "229" and slid out a stainless steel tray containing a body. The corpse was covered from head to ankle by a white sheet, with only the feet protruding, revealing a tag tied to the right big toe, like a grotesque Christmas present.

The morgue attendant pulled back the sheet just far enough to reveal the face. Although drained of all color and eerily still, there was no mistaking the features as belonging to Rose.

"Yeah. That's her," Brut said quietly.

"How did she die?" Gunter asked.

"It's kind of weird," the attendant said.

Gunter looked to where the man was pointing. When the attendant had first opened the cooler, Gunter had been too focused on the head of the body to notice that the sheet covering the midsection of the corpse seemed to almost touch the tray itself.

"My God!" the photographer gasped. "She was cut in half?"

"No, but I can see why you'd think that. Technically, she was eviscerated."

Gunter winced and shut his eyes. "Gott in himmel."

Brut frowned. "What does eviscerated mean?"

"It means she was disemboweled," Gunter said grimly. "But how?"

"That's up to the CSI unit to figure out," the morgue attendant said with a shrug. "All I know is that it involved a freak accident in a plastic surgeon's office."

Gunter could almost see Brut's ears prick up. "Plastic surgeon? You mean Dr Shapiro?"

"Yeah, I think that was the name of the quack. Anyway, apparently she went in for some lipo on her tummy and something happened and... Well, you see how she ended up.

Brut shook his head in disbelief. "But how? Dr Shapiro's one of the best plastic surgeons on the city. How could something like this happen?"

"You're asking the wrong guy, mister." The morgue attendant was clearly not being paid to be comforting and wasn't afraid to demonstrate it. "I don't know if the doc who was working on her will be able to answer any questions, either. Apparently he hit his head pretty hard during the accident and they're not sure if he'll ever wake up again, and the nurse who was working with him had some kind of allergic reaction to the anesthesia that was being used and died."

"This can't be happening to me. It can't!" Brut wailed.

The male model turned and fled the morgue, retching as he ran. Gunter sighed and looked at his watch.

"Well, that's that, then, I guess," the morgue attendant said after a long pause and slid Rose back into her temporary resting place.

As the taxi pulled up to the curb in front of Brut's apartment building, the model looked up at the mid Twentieth century skyscraper he called his home, then looked back at Gunter. The photographer was sitting with his arms folded, frowning at some indeterminate point, lost in thought.

"Uh, thanks, dude, for everything you did today," Brut said in an embarrassed tone of voice.

"Eh?" Gunter glanced up, his reverie broken. "Oh. Sie sind willkommen."

"Sorry I was such a pussy back there."

"Yes. That was regrettable."

"What do we do now?"

Gunter shrugged. "The best I can recommend is that you do your best to keep yourself safe. Don't do anything that might place you in danger. Which means stay the hell put, verstehen sie?"

"Huh?"

Gunter took a deep breath and let it out slowly through his nose before replying. "Don't go anywhere, understand?"

"Yeah. Thanks." He reached inside the jacket he had borrowed from Gunter and paid the cabbie for his portion of the ride. As he got out of the back seat, he turned to give the photographer one last look.

"Guess I'll see you at the funeral, right?"

"I suspect that will be the case," Gunter agreed. "Auf Wiedersehen."

Brut stood on the sidewalk and watched the taxi pull away, heading in the general direction of the Village. Then, heaving a sigh, he turned and entered his building.

As he unlocked his apartment, the first thing that struck him was the stink of reeking garbage. He grimaced as he breathed through his mouth to try and cut down on the stench. The place stank almost as bad as the shooting gallery. Well, there was no more waiting to see who was going to break down and take the garbage out first now. Rose had won out yet again, if only by default of being dead.

He went into the kitchen and quickly bagged up the collection of rotting nearly full take-out containers and hurried down the hall to the incinerator chute, holding the dripping white plastic kitchen bag

at arm's length. As he reached for the handle that opened the chute, he suddenly stopped. Gunter had told him not to do anything that might place himself in danger. What if he slipped while taking out the garbage and fell headfirst down the chute into the incinerator? Although the fall itself might not kill him, what if today was the day the super was scheduled to burn the trash, and the incinerator was lit? Better not to chance it. Better safe than sorry, right? He dropped the bag of ripe garbage in the hallway just under the chute and hurried back to the safety of his apartment.

The moment he crossed the threshold he slammed the door shut and leaned his back against it, sighing in relief at escaping such a close call. His heart was beating in his chest like that of a rabbit that has just escaped the jaws of a hunting dog.

Alone in his apartment, Brut wandered from room to room, picking up pieces of Rose's clothes that were scattered about on the floor and on the backs of chairs and began tossing them into a fresh trash bag. He then went to the dresser they had shared for the last six months and began emptying her possessions from the various drawers. As he did so, he did not pause to smell her clothes to try and catch the lingering scent of her personal perfume. He merely moved from dresser to closet to shoe tree, packing away all visible evidence that she had ever shared space with him with the speed and efficiency of a professional mover.

Gunter sighed wearily as he entered his townhouse, but was relieved to see that Cabernet had not arrived home yet. There were a few things he needed to do before she got back. She was stressed out enough as it was, between the baby and so many of her friends dying. He certainly didn't need her worrying about the very distinct possibility of Death stalking her and their unborn child.

His mind kept turning back to what the old man at the funeral home had said, about seeing the shadow cast by the angel of death's wings upon their faces. Was it possible to actually see signs as to who

might be next and who might be spared, assuming one knew what to look at?

He had not taken a photograph of the entire "Cellar", as Merlot had been fond of calling her stable, since that day six months ago, when they had been gathered together for the editorial shoot. Perhaps there was something on the rolls of film from that day that might reveal something of Death's plans for them? He wasn't sure if there was anything to such specious logic, but it was all he had to go on.

He kept the negatives from all his previous shoots in a series of special filing cabinets in his home office, just in case he needed to create fresh prints in a hurry for clients or friends. He unlocked the top drawer on one of the cabinets and opened it, his fingers trembling as they skimmed over the raised tabs of the file folders, each of which bore a date and the name of the client who had paid for the shoot. Six months ago... Six months ago... Who had been the client? *Condé Nast*?

Suddenly there was the sound of a key in the lock downstairs and he heard the front door swing open.

"Gunter? Sweetheart? Are you home?"

"I'm in the office, schatzie. I'll be right down," the photographer called over his shoulder as he quickly closed the file drawer. His search would have to wait until later, after Cabernet had settled in for the night.

Brut took the bags of clothes and knickknacks that belonged to Rose and placed them beside the front door. He was uncertain whether or not he should set them aside for her family, which lived in Ohio or someplace like that, or just toss them down the incinerator. It really depended on which would inconvenience him the least.

After all, it wasn't as if he'd loved Rose. Of course he hadn't. Just as he had never really loved Sherry. Or anyone else, for that matter. As it was, Rose was proving herself to be high maintenance and had

started getting on his nerves. In a way, her dying was extremely expedient. It allowed him to get her out of his life without the attendant ugliness of a break-up. Still, there were expectations that came with being a surviving boyfriend. It was going to be difficult to appear grieved at the funeral. But then, pretending to have emotions he wasn't actually feeling was what he did for a living.

He positioned himself in front of the mirror in the bathroom and pictured himself stretched out in a coffin, dressed in his best Armani, his face pale but still young and handsome. As the picture grew more and more detailed in his mind, his eyes filled with tears and rolled down his cheeks as freely as water from a leaky faucet. He smiled to himself and nodded as he wiped the tears dripping from his chin. That's what he needed to call upon whenever he was in public and asked about Rose. Gunter had caught him by surprise earlier today, and he was afraid he had revealed far too much to the German more than he had to anyone since he was kid in the foster care system.

Although he had never truly known love and affection, he knew from personal experience that most people did not trust those who did not show any outward signs of feeling such emotions. Frankly, he could not understand why everyone seemed to think it was so damned important. As far as he could tell, all that loving anyone got you was betrayal, heartbreak and pain. It was far wiser, and safer, to restrict oneself to those emotions that best promoted one's self-interest and pleasure, such as lust, hate, suspicion, greed and anger. Those were the emotions that kept you alive. God knows his mother, the miserable cow, could have used more hate and suspicion, rather than love and trust.

Brut had never truly known his mother, but that did not keep him from hating her. After all, it was because of her stupidity that he had been left to suffer hell at the hands of the foster care system. Then again, it wasn't one hundred percent his mother's fault. His father had a large hand in it as well. Brut hated him even more than his mother. He also hated his grandfather as much as his dad, which really wasn't that hard to do, given that they were the same person.

His dear old grandpa daddy had been an Okie cracker named Delbert Davis. He and his wife, Katie, lived with their three sons and

four daughters fifteen miles outside of Burnt Tree, Oklahoma, at the end of a rutted, dirt road in two mobile homes put together and barricaded like a fortress, complete with "No Trespassing" signs and a cinderblock wall with barbed wire wrapped around the top.

Davis was obsessed with control and maintaining what he considered "discipline" within his large, ragged family. No mail came to the house, there was no telephone, and none of the children or his wife were allowed friends. The children were allowed to attend school up to the eighth grade, which was the minimum the state allowed at the time, but nothing more. After that, the children's lives consisted of nothing but chores and helping their father work at the auto salvage he owned and operated.

When Davis's eldest daughter, Becky, turned twelve, he developed an unnatural interest in her budding femininity, and it wasn't long before he was raping her on a daily basis. When she turned fifteen, she became pregnant by him. The result of that incestuous union was none other than Brut himself, although back then he was William Delbert Davis, called Billy-Del by his kith and kin.

Becky Davis fled the family compound with her infant son shortly after he was born and went to live in nearby Oklahoma City, where she worked as a waitress at a waffle house. It was there a year later that she met her fiancé, a good-natured truck mechanic named Beau Taylor. Beau didn't drink to excess or beat on her much, and didn't seem to mind Billy-Del being part of the scenery, so Becky decided to accept his offer of marriage. And then she did something really stupid. She decided to write her mother a letter to tell her about the upcoming nuptials. Grandma Katie wrote back, begging her daughter to come home for a visit, so the family could have a big reunion and celebrate the happy news together. She said that grandpa daddy had changed since she left, and wanted to see her again and give Becky and her intended his blessings. And Becky, being the idiot she was, agreed.

No one was really sure what actually happened that day. The only survivor of the massacre was Billy-Del and, at eighteen months, he was too young to know what was going on, or answer questions even if he did. What was known was that on December 20th 1984, Delbert

Davis had driven into town in his beat up old tow truck, walked into the Wal-Mart and shot a cashier named Estelle Nicholls six times in the face and head, then walked down the street to the Circle K Convenience Store, where he shot two men standing in the parking lot. He then walked across the street to the post office and walked into the lobby and shot both the postmaster for the town of Burnt Tree and a hapless customer standing in line to mail holiday packages. As both the sheriff and state police pulled up outside the post office, Davis stepped outside and pointed his weapon at the assembled lawmen, only to go down in a hail of gunfire.

When law enforcement drove out to the Davis home, they quickly realized that the carnage that had gone down in town was merely the end of Davis's carnage, not its start.

In the first trailer they found Davis's adult son, Delbert Junior, his wife and their six year-old daughter all shot through the head. Nearby lay Becky and her fiancé, Beau Taylor, also shot. The remains of Katie Davis, her sixteen and thirteen year-old sons, and her three daughters, aged fifteen, twelve and ten, were found in the second trailer. A search of the property turned up three more victims, hidden in the trunks of the junked vehicles scattered about the compound. Two of the bodies were those of twin boys, barely three months old. Investigators later discovered these were Davis's sons by his second oldest daughter, Lisa. The third victim was also a very young child, but was, miraculously, still alive. That miracle baby was Billy-Del, who had survived grandpa daddy's attempt to smother him by locking him inside the trunk of a 1972 Monte Carlo.

Whatever the trigger for the rampage may have been, all but one member of the Davis clan—including grown children who had moved away but returned for the ill-fated "family reunion"—were dead.

One would think that avoiding the same fate as the rest of his kin would have qualified as luck for Billy-Del, right? But he turned out to be far from lucky. What with every blood relative deader than a doornail, there was nowhere for little Billy-Del to go but into the state foster care system.

For the next six years his life was one of constant uncertainty, fear, chaos, neglect and abuse. If he wasn't getting beat with a belt or

whipped with a lamp cord, he was having a dick stuck in his mouth or someone's mouth sucking on his. Even when there was no physical abuse, there was always someone willing to make sure he was hurting inside. Like when he was five and one of the older kids he was sharing a foster home with thought it would be funny to tell him the truth about his parentage and how his grandpa daddy killed everyone in his family. That's when he started *really* hating his mother.

But his luck finally started to change when he turned seven. That was when the Simms family adopted him. Michael and Joan Simms were a wealthy childless couple who had been steered in his direction by a sympathetic social worker. By that time it was becoming apparent that despite his inbred background, Billy-Del was going to grow up to be a very handsome young man, which certainly worked in his favor. The Simms fell in love with him at first sight. The next thing he knew he was no longer Billy-Del Davis, but Billy Simms, and he no longer lived in Oklahoma, but in San Diego.

But his problems didn't stop miraculously just because loving people with lots of money and a nice house adopted him. Although Mr and Mrs Simms were good people, they were unprepared to deal with a child as deeply traumatized as Billy.

From the moment he came to live with them, he was a major behavioral problem: defiant, destructive, loud, violent, distrustful, with a lack of eye contact, and a need to be in control of everyone and every situation. But perhaps the most frustrating aspect of his personality, as far as his adoptive parents were concerned, was his inability to accept their love or return it, while having no apparent distrust of strangers, often walking up to them and touching them as if they were close friends. However if his new mother tried to hug him, he would turn his back to her and flinch whenever she stroked his hair or patted his head. Whenever they tried to step up their show of love for him, he would react defiantly, returning their kindness with arguments and sassmouth. His rejection of their love was baffling and deeply hurtful to the Simms, especially Joan, who had so desperately yearned for a child to love as her own.

The thing was Billy knew that he had it good with the Simms. They fed him when he was hungry; they bought him nice clothes and all the toys he could play with. There wasn't anything he wanted they would not run out and get for him. But he had learned as a toddler that he could not rely on the adults in his life to keep him safe. It didn't matter how patient, loving or kind his new parents were, he knew that it was only a matter of time before they would reject him or become violent or abusive.

Then one night he happened to overhear Mrs Simms in her bedroom weeping and saying how nothing seemed to reach Billy, no matter how much she tried to show her love for him. Mr Simms then suggested that perhaps they had made a mistake and they should void the adoption and return Billy back to the authorities.

Upon hearing the Simms discuss the possibility of returning Billy to the foster care system, he felt as if his initial suspicion of his adoptive parents had been validated. Despite their claims they loved him and would help him, deep down they were willing to dispose of him, just as everyone else in his life had done. Still, while Billy might have been incapable of loving the Simms, he wasn't stupid. Although he did not trust them, and suspected their motivations for being nice to him, he did not want to go back into foster care, where the best he could look forward to was indifference and neglect. If avoiding that meant pretending to return the love the Simms were so desperate to give him—well, he had certainly suffered worse in the name of self-preservation.

For a couple of days Billy hung around the playground, pretending to swing on the swings and ride on the teeter-totter, but in reality he was watching the other boys and girls interact with their parents. He watched the children and noticed which collection of behaviors, facial expressions and words elicited the most favorable response from their respective families. Then, one morning, as Mrs Simms was preparing him to go to school, Billy threw his arms around her waist and buried his head in her stomach and told her he loved her and was sorry he had been such a bad boy. Whatever plans the Simms may have had for returning Billy were effectively scrapped after that.

It did not take Billy long to learn that saying "I love you" to his new mother and father, even though he did not truly feel the emotion, got him the things he wanted from them—primarily shelter, sustenance and gifts. Although he had to go through a lot of trouble to pretend to return his parents' love, Billy found the opportunity to manipulate and control the emotions of those around him deeply satisfying.

As he grew older, and his physical charms became more and more apparent, he also learned that saying "I love you" when he didn't mean it could also get him sex from whoever he wanted it, whenever he wanted it. Frankly, it didn't matter to him if the head in his lap belonged to a Russian supermodel or a New York fashion designer, as long as his physical needs were being met the moment he wanted them to be. Although he was incapable of being there emotionally for others, he had an insatiable desire for others to validate his existence with their approval of his appearance and desire for his company. That was what made him becoming a model a natural progression. What better profession for someone who expects to be admired for simply drawing breath and wearing clothes? When Merlot rechristened him Brut, he felt as if he had truly been reborn into the role and world he rightly deserved. The moment he set foot on his first catwalk, he buried Billy-Del Davis in a place far deeper and far darker than any tomb any murderous Okie ever could imagine.

Still, despite his success at appearing to be an emotionally functional human being, there was a persistent hollowness inside him. That's when the heroin, and other drugs, came in. Whenever he was forced to think about things he did not want to, or felt that things were no longer within his ability to control, he would turn to the needle. Only then did the howling void within his heart become tolerable.

Speaking of which, he could really have done with some smack. He hated uncertainty. It made him feel powerless and helpless. Those were feelings that belonged to Billy-Del, not Brut. He had hoped that Gunter would have been able to come up with some plan or scheme to try and escape the horrible sense of dread that was haunting his every step and movement, but the photographer had proven himself unable—or unwilling—to protect him. If only there was some way he

could figure out what would happen to him and when? Then he could plan accordingly, making sure to avoid the situation that would lead to his death. But who could possibly know such a thing?

It dawned on him who he could turn to, who he could ask for help. He slapped himself on the forehead, unable to believe he had not thought of it before.

Gunter was puttering around in the kitchen, getting supper ready for himself and Cabernet, while she was upstairs unpacking her suitcase.

Although he was happy to see her, he could not help feeling that her returning to the city placed both herself and their baby in danger. So far, all of the models who had died had done so in New York City, except for Shiraz, who had been killed in nearby Jersey. For some obscure reason, Death had not chosen to have them bitten in two while frolicking on a beach in Hawaii during a swimsuit shoot, or choke on a cocktail shrimp at a Paris reception. Why the hell would Death—an entity that could be everywhere in the world at the same time—suddenly be restricted by the New York Transit System? It just didn't make any sense.

If only he could remember the exact date and name of the client who had booked the shoot of the Cellar. Although he wasn't sure why, he sensed that the key to escaping Death's grisly clutches lay in those photographs.

He opened the refrigerator and took out a jar of grey poupon mustard and set it on the counter next to the ham sandwiches he was making for Cabernet and himself. As he closed the stainless steel door, his gaze skimmed across the welter of hand-written shopping lists, personal notes, receipts, coupons, newspaper clippings and other ephemera held to its surface by a collection of kitchen magnets. He found himself staring at a commercially developed four-by-six color photograph, no doubt taken with a disposable 35mm camera of some sort, which was half-hidden by a take-out menu from the Chinese restaurant down the block. The unobscured photograph

showed what looked to be Shiraz, Cabernet and Chablis, in casual poses, apparently chatting with one another.

Gunter's heart leapt into hyperdrive, creating a bulge in his throat the size of an egg. With trembling hands, he plucked the picture from its place on the fridge and stared at it. Now that the menu was removed, he could see that Brut, Sherry, Chardonnay and Merlot were also visible in the picture, all of them busy talking, none of them aware they were being photographed. To his surprise, he saw himself standing in the background, a camera in his hands. This was indeed a picture of the shoot he had been trying to find in his files, but it was clear that he had not been the one responsible for taking it. He flipped the picture over and saw an inscription written on the back in lavender ballpoint pen.

"Cabby, I took this when no one was looking that last day you all were together. Thought you might want it to remember Merlot and the good ole days. XOXO Justinian."

Suddenly, there was the sound of something plastic falling to the floor and breaking upstairs, followed by Cabernet loudly calling out his name. Without thinking, he stuck the picture in his pants pocket and hurried up the stairs.

"Cabby? What's wrong? Cabby?"

"I'm in the bathroom."

He found her leaning against the sink pedestal, the shattered remains of her blow dryer at her feet, along with a large puddle of pinkish-colored water. His eyes widened in alarm.

"Scheisse!" he exclaimed. Cabernet wasn't scheduled for delivery for another week and a half.

"Call the doctor and then get us a cab," Cabernet gritted out between clenched teeth. "My waters just broke."

As Brut left his apartment, he could not believe neither he nor Gunter had thought of asking Sherry for help before. How could they have been so blind? She was the one who had foreseen the accident. She was the one who had seen into the future and acted to

circumvent Death's plans. Perhaps whatever it was that caused her to have the premonition on the pier was not a one-time thing. If she was able to see into the future and cheat Death once, who was to say that she could not do it again?

He hurried toward the elevator, then halted abruptly, eyeing its shut doors warily. Gunter had told him to stay put and not do anything that might put him in danger. What if he punched the button to call the elevator car and the doors opened onto empty space and he plummeted to his death? Or, worse yet, the car was there but the doors shut on him halfway and cut him in two? It was safer to take the stairs and walk down the six flights rather than risk any number of grisly fates that might await him if he took the elevator to the lobby.

It would probably be safer to simply call Sherry from his apartment and ask her over the phone if she had any premonitions about who was next to die and how, but he knew better than to try that. Sherry had caller ID on her phone and he knew the last thing she wanted to do was to talk to him. The way he dumped her had not been the best in the world, but at the time he honestly thought she was going to remain in a coma for the rest of her life. Not that her being in a coma was the reason he dumped her. Unconscious or not, she still looked like ten miles of really bad road. The sex and everything with her had been good, but it certainly wasn't worth having to look at that every day, much less screw it.

No, he stood a better chance of getting what he needed from Sherry by showing up unannounced on her doorstep. He knew what it took to manipulate a woman into giving him whatever it was he wanted, and Sherry was no different. If he had to fuck her to get it, then that's what he would have to do. In the long run, it was no different than teaching himself not to punch his adoptive mother every time she tried to hug him.

Once he was on the street and headed in the general direction of Sherry's loft, it occurred to him that he had better call Gunter and tell him what he was going to do. He fished his cellphone out of his jacket and dialed the photographer's number. It rang several times before going to voicemail.

"Uh, hey, Gunter? This is Brut. You there? Pick up if you're there. Okay, well, I wanted you to know that I'm going over to Sherry's. I've been thinking and that maybe she can help us. You know, since she saw the future before—maybe she can see it again. I'm on my way over there right now. Give me a call when you get this message, okay? Later, dude."

Sherry's place was in SoHo, not far from the Spring Street Station. If he hopped the subway, he could get there fairly quickly. As he hurried toward the green, metal art nouveau style entrance to the multiple platforms of the Union Square/Fourteenth Street Station, it occurred to him that maybe going underground might not be the safest way for him to travel. It would be very easy for him to be jostled off a crowded platform onto the tracks below. If the train didn't kill him, there was always the third rail to be aware of. Not to mention the rats. What if he fell off the platform, broke his leg and got eaten by rats? No, it would be safer to take a cab than the subway. As he stepped toward the curb and raised his arm to hail one of the yellow sedans, he heard an ominous rumble and looked up. The sun was already starting to set, but that had nothing to do with the darkening sky. Heavy, dark gray clouds were rolling toward the city from the direction of the East River, pushed by a stiff wind that made the large flag in the middle of Union Square Park snap like a whip. If he was lucky, he might make it to Sherry's neighborhood before the storm hit.

A cab swerved out of traffic and came to a halt next to him. The hack, who had tribal scarring across his brow ridge and nose, peered out from his half-open window at Brut. "Where to?" he asked in heavily accented English.

"SoHo. Corner of Spring and Wooster," Brut said as he climbed into the back.

The cabbie nodded and threw the switch on the fare timer mounted on the dashboard. The moment he did so, there was a flash of lightning, followed by a burst of thunder loud enough to make the windows rattle in their mountings, and sheets of rain poured down onto the streets of Manhattan as if someone had upended a giant bucket onto the city.

Safe and dry in the back seat of the cab, Brut looked out of the window, trying to figure out what would be the best way for him to broach the subject of Sherry reading his future. He doubted she had heard about Rose's death yet. So, he could use that as an excuse to show up on her door. He could combine that with pretending to be concerned for her safety. That way he could bring up the information about the previous incidences with Flight 180 and Route 23, and how everything seemed to be repeating itself, only this time with themselves and their friends. Yes, that sounded like it might work. All he needed to do was appeal to her fear and sense of self-preservation and perhaps dangle the hope of reconciliation.

The deluge outside had yet to slacken, and from where he sat it looked as if the cab might as well have been going through a car wash, not driving down a city street. Maybe taking a cab wasn't such a good idea after all. The drains lining the streets were inundated by the sudden downpour, their grates cluttered and clogged by a collection of detritus washed from the sidewalks and gutters, creating standing water nearly ankle-deep in low-lying intersections. Pedestrians darted back and forth along the streets, trying to find shelter under awnings and in doorways. As Brut glanced back toward the dashboard to check on the price of his fare, he was startled to see that only one of the cab's windshield wipers seemed to be working, and it was dragging a large strip of rubber. Suddenly an amber traffic light appeared just before the taxi's hood.

"Watch out!" Brut yelled as the light turned from yellow to red.

The cabbie slammed on the brakes, but instead of coming to a halt, the taxi hydroplaned through the intersection. Brut screamed as he saw an Entenmanns's Bakery truck about to T-bone the side of the taxi he was sitting in. The cabbie jerked the steering wheel as hard as he could, taking the vehicle up onto the sidewalk, where it collided with a short, squat blue US mail box. The Entenmanns's delivery truck continued on its way through the intersection, sending up huge plumes of water in its wake.

Brut sat there for a long moment, trembling like a plucked chord, his eyes wide with fear. He jumped and gave a startled shout as a

bystander on the sidewalk outside rapped on the window next to him.

"Hey, buddy!" the pedestrian yelled, shouting to make himself heard over the rain and through the rolled up window. "You okay?"

Brut did a quick body check and, to his amazement, discovered he was unscathed. "Yeah, I think so."

"What about the driver?"

Brut leaned forward in his seat and looked at the cabbie. The driver's side air bag had deployed, filling a good section of the front seat. The driver was slumped forward, his face hidden within the white plastic inflatable bag. He was very still and Brut could see blood trickling down the air bag's surface to the floorboards. He noticed that the fare meter had stopped at thirteen dollars.

"He's not moving. The driver's hurt. I think he might be dead."

"Just stay put, buddy. Paramedics are on the way."

Stay put? How could he stay put when it was clear that Death had him in its sights? He wasn't going to just sit still and wait for it to find him again. This made it the third time in his life that he had escaped Death; the first as a baby, the second time on Pier Thirteen. He had no intention of pushing his luck a fourth time.

Brut opened the passenger side door of the cab and clambered out onto the sidewalk. He was instantly soaked by the cold, slashing rain, but he didn't care. Better to be alive and drenched than dead and dry.

The good Samaritan who had spoken to him through the window was standing on the driver's side, trying to check on the cabbie. He looked up at Brut, baffled as to why he would get out of the car.

"Hey, where do you think you're going?"

"I can't stay," the model babbled, trying to explain himself. He reached into his pocket and hurled a fistful of twenties into the back seat. "Give that to him when he wakes up. I have to go. It's dangerous here."

With that, Brut turned and ran as fast as he could through the pouring rain in the direction of Sherry's neighborhood.

Ed Romero had been working under the streets of New York City for most of his adult life. As an employee of the city's Department of Public Works, he was as familiar with the sixty-six hundred miles of mains and pipes that handled the storm run-off and the waste from sinks, tubs and toilets of America's greatest city as he was with his wife. Probably more so. That was why his supervisor had sent him down to check out the problem with the SoHo sewer system. They had been getting reports from the Transit Authority that a busted sewer main was dumping runoff mixed with human waste into a stretch of tunnel used by the A, C and E trains. This wasn't an uncommon problem, given the fact that many of the pipes, connecting sewers and combined mains in that part of town were over one hundred and fifty years old. He'd been sloshing through ankle-deep water in the six foot high, five foot wide sewer mains under Houston Street for the better part of four hours when he finally located the breach. The break in the main was roughly three feet wide—big enough for him to fall through, if he wasn't careful. He leaned forward cautiously and shined his flashlight down the gaping hole. He couldn't see the bottom, but he could hear the water trickling down the hole and splashing against something below. He fished his shortwave radiophone out of his rubber overalls and squeezed the send button. "Hey, Phil? It's me. I found the break."

"Great! You must be psychic—I was just getting ready to beep you, Ed."

"What's up?"

"You'll wanna be getting outta there as soon as you can, buddy. We've got a heavy thunderstorm coming our way and she's moving fast. You don't wanna be down under when she hits."

"I read you, Phil. I'm heading back to the utility truck. I'll radio in the coordinates when I get there."

"Yeah—it's not like we can do anything while it's raining. Catch ya topside, Ed."

Romero turned and started backtracking toward the intersection where he had originally parked his utility vehicle and accessed the sewer main by opening a manhole cover. However, within a few minutes, what had originally been ankle-deep water had become

shin-high, as the torrential rainfall dousing the streets above found its way into the sewers. As the water began to rise rapidly toward the tops of his rubber knee-boots, Romero had to struggle against the current. Since the sewage and runoff that emptied into the mains relied almost entirely on gravity to keep the waste flowing, he knew that if he lost his footing, the current would sweep him along with the rain water, oil, antifreeze, garbage and dog poop until he reached the treatment plant. At least three or four sewer workers had to be fished out of the treatment vats over on Thirteenth Street, and Romero had no desire to be one of this year's unlucky.

He double checked his map and saw there was a manhole a hundred yards ahead. According to the map, it was right off the curb, not in the middle of a street, so he did not have to worry about emerging into traffic. By the time he made it to the access ladder, the water was nearly hip deep and it was all he could do to remain upright.

He climbed as fast as he could toward the dim sunlight filtering through the metal disc overhead. He reached around and removed the manhole key from his belt that fit virtually every drain lid in the city and inserted it into the center of the circular metal plate above his head, and turned it ninety degrees. All he had to do was press his shoulder and back against the one hundred pound disc and pray he wasn't coming up under a parked car. To his relief, the manhole cover scraped open without any difficulty. As Romero pushed the drain lid to one side in order to give himself enough room to climb out, water from the street above splashed down, striking him in the face. Startled, he dropped the manhole key, which plummeted eight feet down into the rushing water.

"Shit!" Romero swore as he clambered out onto the street. "Great. Now I can't close the damned lid."

He looked around at the rain washed sidewalks as he tried to place where he was. His truck was about three, maybe four blocks away. He had a spare key in his tool chest under the front seat. Since the streets were virtually empty of pedestrians due to the ferocity of the storm, he could probably get to his truck and drive it back before anyone noticed the open manhole cover.

Sherry stood under the awning in front of the Korean grocery down the street from her apartment building, scowling up at the rain-drenched sky, although no one but she knew she was doing so. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, since the mask she wore to hide her scarred face was always smiling, she was always happy. Except for when she was on business for the gray man, she rarely left her loft except to go to her physical therapist or get a few things from the corner market. Trust her luck that something like *this* would happen on one of her rare excursions outside.

"Would you care to use my umbrella?" The voice that spoke at her elbow was deep, cultured and all too familiar.

Sherry turned to stare at the gray man, who was standing beside her as if he had been there all along. Perhaps he had. He was dressed as he always was, except that this time he was carrying a gunmetal gray golf club over one shoulder.

"What do you want from me?" she asked coldly.

"Want?" The gray man lifted an elegantly sculpted eyebrow. "Is that what drives you mortals? Want and need? Don't answer that, it's a rhetorical question. I am here to see that you go home."

"Why?"

"Because you are about to have a visitor," the gray man explained as he handed her his umbrella, flashing her a smile with teeth as big and white as tombstones.

By the time Brut reached Sherry's block he was soaked to the skin. His hair was plastered to his head and his feet squelched inside his shoes with every step he took. He felt as wet and as cold as the mackerel on display in their beds of crushed ice over at the Fulton Street Fish Market, his teeth literally chattering in his head. At least he was finally within striking distance of his goal.

A sudden movement across the street caught Brut's eye. He saw someone who looked like Sherry, a gray umbrella clutched in one

hand and a plastic bag of groceries held in the other, hurrying toward the front entrance of her apartment building. He could not help but break into a grin. What luck. There was one way she could turn him aside if she saw him on the street, looking like a half-drowned sewer rat.

"Sherry!" he shouted, waving his arms to get her attention. "Sherry, it's me. Wait up."

Sherry stopped mid-stride and turned to face Brut, her umbrella still held aloft over her head. In the rain, the mask she wore looked eerily real, and for a moment it was as if she was her old self again—except for her eyes. There was something different about them, as if they had somehow become both darker and colder than before.

"Sherry, I need to talk to you," Brut called out, fearful she might turn her back on him after all. He glanced to the left then the right, to make sure no traffic was coming, and stepped off the curb to cross the street and disappeared down an open manhole as quick as the White Rabbit.

Sherry stood there, staring at where he had been for a long moment, her outward face smiling pleasantly to itself, then turned and entered the building behind her without a second glance.

As Brut fell down the manhole, he struck the cast iron rungs jutting from the access shaft, breaking his left leg below the knee. The moment he hit the water below, he was swept along by the current, pulled through the rain-swollen sewer main along with every plastic soda bottle, used condom and discarded fast food wrapper in Lower Manhattan.

The model tried to claw at the sides of the sewer as he was swept along, but his fingers were unable to find purchase on their poured concrete surface. He tried to kick his legs to swim against the current, but the pain from his broken shin caused him to scream, sending foul smelling water into his mouth and nostrils. He was sucked underneath the surface and found himself buffeted against the walls of the main, colliding with submerged pieces of wood, masonry and other items that somehow found their way underneath the streets of the city.

Just as he thought his lungs would burst from trying to hold his breath, Brut shot out of the sewer main and into open air, hurtling through a black, featureless void. But before he could continue falling, there was the sound of fabric catching on some unseen object, and Brut was brought to an abrupt halt.

It took him several heartbeats to realize he wasn't dead but dangling upside down like a piñata, suspended from a jutting pipe by the belt loops of his jeans. Although he was still being doused with water from overhead, he was at least able to breathe. He couldn't see anything but pitch black in any direction—although he wasn't really in any position to do more than look up or down—but he got the impression he was in a tunnel of some kind underneath the sewer main.

A wave of euphoria at having once more escaped certain death, literally by the seat of his pants, overcame him, and he began laughing hysterically. "I made it, old man!" he shouted at the darkness. "Try as you might, you can't catch me. I beat you when I was two and I beat you again at twenty-two. I win, you old bastard! You killed them all but you can't kill *me*."

Brut was surrounded by quietness and he stood there for some time, breathlessly. Then there was a noise in the darkness and the tunnel began to shake and shudder. He felt it in his legs first. Then he felt his stomach churn as he recognized the familiar sound of steel on steel as it grew closer and closer, pushing a wall of warm, ozone-tinged air in front of it.

Out of the darkness came a blinding white light, causing Brut to raise his arms to shield his eyes. He screamed as hard and as loud as he could, but it was lost in the squeal from the subway train's brakes.

The last thing Brut saw was the look of shock and horror on the conductor's face as he stared out the window of the forward car the split second before he was splashed against the glass like a bug on a windshield.

THIRTEEN

Sherry walked into the foyer of her building, casually shaking the rain off her umbrella as she headed toward the elevator, aware of the concierge's eyes on her every step of the way. If anyone had seen her leaving for the grocery store, she doubted the fact that she had left without an umbrella and returned carrying one would have registered on their consciousness.

Even though there was no way that her face could betray her thoughts and feelings, she had to be wary that her body language did not give her away. She could not allow herself to tremble or stumble, for fear of calling attention to herself. The most anyone would be able to decipher from the way she moved and held herself as she waited for the elevator to arrive was that she might be mildly consternated from being caught out in the rain, nothing more.

Upon reaching her floor, she let herself into her apartment. She placed her wet umbrella in the corner behind the front door. She carried the plastic bag full of groceries into the kitchen and began to shelve them, all the while trying not to think about what she had just seen. As she was placing a can of tomato soup in the pantry, she suddenly gasped as a jolt of energy traveled from the top of her head and through her body, causing her fingers to spasm open so that she dropped the can. As before, although the energy that passed through her seemed electrical in nature, instead of burning or searing her flesh, it left her with a numb, tingling sensation, as if she had been plunged into a vat of icy slush.

She bent to retrieve the dropped can and saw that her hand was shaking. She knew that the bone-numbing chill that claimed her meant that Brut—a man she had shared her bed and her life with for over a year—was dead. But were her hands trembling out of grief, or simply from the cold? She knew she should be able to answer that question for herself, but instead she seemed disconnected from what was going on in her own mind, as if she was driving a car while sitting in the passenger seat.

She walked out of the kitchen, went into the living room and stood in front of the mirror, which was hanging on the wall over her sofa. It had gold tones and was two feet wide and four feet long. It was set in an ornate tarnished silver frame. Sherry pushed the mask up on its hinge, like a welder lifting his visor, and stared at the changes wrought by her former boyfriend's death.

Although far from perfect, her features were no longer the ruined roadmap of scar tissue and skin grafts it had been on the day of her release from the hospital. Her neck, jaw line, and lower face, at least from the cheekbones down, were completely unmarked. The remaining scars were centered about her eyes and forehead. If not for her nose, which looked like something out of *The Phantom of the Opera*, it almost looked as if she was wearing a tight-fitting latex half-mask.

Sherry traced the soft, supple bow of her lips with her fingertip, as if she was putting on lipstick. The reclamation of her features did not inspire relief within her. With each healing she looked not at the flesh that had been recovered, but instead focused on the scars that remained. She did not feel any sense of relief from knowing that she was almost healed, only impatience that she was *still* unfinished.

Sherry tried to find some sorrow for the death of Brut. Despite his treatment of her, at one time she had loved him. Or thought she had. Instead, all she was able to muster was mild surprise at how empty she felt.

Indeed, when she thought about it, it seemed that she no longer felt anything *but* anxiety regarding her condition and hatred toward those she perceived as being better off than herself. Joy, happiness, sadness, even satisfaction at knowing that those who had betrayed her had come to well-deserved ends, were all feelings lacking from her emotional palette.

Surely she should be feeling something? After all, she had helped orchestrate the deaths of five of her closest friends. Well, four of her closest friends and Rose. And although she had not killed them personally, she had led Death to their doors. She should at least experience some guilt or remorse, or, in Rose's case, glee. Instead, there was a disturbing lack of anything. It was as if with each touch

of Death's hand, the coldness lingered, numbing not only her flesh, but her soul as well.

There was a flicker in the mirror, as if its surface had turned to liquid, and she was surprised to see a figure standing behind her, looming over her shoulder.

Sherry gasped and spun around, but there was no one standing behind her.

Feeling disoriented, she once again turned her attention to the mirror only to see the figure standing behind her. Except the apparition had taken on a definite physical appearance. The face that grinned back at Sherry was none other than her own, except that the features were completely unmarked by scars and sutures, and the eyes were gray as gunsmoke.

"You're a fool if you think you should feel sorry for anyone but yourself," the apparition sneered. "Do you think any of those dunces you helped shepherd to their rightful ends ever had a thought for anyone but themselves?"

"I don't know. I never really gave much thought to things like that before the accident," Sherry admitted. "I was too busy with my own life and career to worry about other people."

"Exactly my point. So why worry about them now?"

"It's just that I feel so *cold* all the time now. Not just physically, but inside. It's like each time I'm healed the cold goes deeper and lasts longer. I feel...numb. Like my heart's been shot full of Novocaine."

The apparition laughed, amused by the look of distress on Sherry's half-ruined face. "You really should listen to yourself! What's more important to you? Regaining your former life or feeling all goopy and fuzzy about puppies and Easter chicks?"

Before Sherry could answer the question, the phone rang. As she turned to answer the phone, she could see the apparition hovering in the mirror, smirking at her turned back.

"Hello?"

"Sherry? It's Gunter."

"Oh, uh... Hi, Gunter."

"Cabernet asked me to call you. She's at St Vincent's."

"Cabby's in the hospital? What for?"

"Her waters broke a little while ago. She's going into labor."

"Isn't she early?"

"Yes. I think the stress of the last few days has something to do with it. Chablis and Shiraz were bad enough. But now with Chardonnay and Rose dead on top of it all..."

"Is she okay?"

"The doctor says that both her and the baby's vitals are good."

"Well, thanks for calling me and keeping me informed, Gunter."

"No, you don't understand, Sherry. Cabby is asking for you. She wants you with her in the delivery suite."

Sherry was uncertain as to how to respond to such information. She looked up at the mirror across the room and saw the apparition wearing her perfect face, grinning and nodding eagerly, urging her to take action. As her eyes locked with those of the thing in the mirror, the cold within her veins converged on her heart, crusting it with ice.

"I'll be right over," she said into the receiver.

Gunter hung up the payphone in the waiting room and heaved a huge sigh, leaning his head against the faux-wood privacy divider. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had to rely on a payphone. He had been in such a hurry to get Cabby to the hospital that he had forgotten his cellphone. Considering everything he had on his mind, he was surprised he didn't dash out of the house barefoot and with his clothes on back to front.

Cabernet's premature labor was particularly troubling, given her family's history of difficulties during childbirth. Gunter knew for a fact that both Cabby's maternal grandmother and aunt had died trying to give birth.

Although Cabby's OB/GYN, Dr Kronenberg, was an excellent doctor, Gunter knew that the greatest danger to his family wasn't something modern medicine, despite all its advances, could defeat.

As Gunter walked back to Cabby's birth suite, he spotted her OB/GYN working on some charts at the nurse's station.

"Excuse me... Doctor Kronenberg?"

The obstetrician turned to greet him, his brow furrowing as he strove to put a name to the face. "Ah, Mr Nonhoff, isn't it?"

"How is she? How is Cabby?"

"She's doing just fine."

"How much longer before the baby comes?"

"Well, she's barely dilated more than three centimeters, and her contractions are roughly fifteen minutes apart. She's in pain, but she's able to walk. If her waters hadn't already broken, I would have told her to go home and come back when the contractions were less than ten minutes apart. At this rate, it could take anywhere from two hours to two days."

"That long?" Gunter could not keep the disappointment from showing in his voice. "Is there anything I can do?"

Dr Kronenberg smiled sympathetically and clapped the expectant father on the shoulder. "All I can tell you is to be patient. Babies come when they are ready, not before. For the time being, the most important thing you can do for her is just to be there. Hold her hand. Help her get to and from the bathroom. And don't take it personally if she starts yelling at you," he said with a laugh. "After all, you helped put her in this predicament."

Gunter tried to laugh, but it came out weak. If the doctor noticed his anxiety, he no doubt passed it off as simply another case of father-to-be jitters.

Dr Kronenberg glanced back down at the clipboard he was holding. "I have her down as being signed up for natural childbirth. Is that still the case?"

"Ja. She does not want any drugs."

"Very well," the doctor said, making a note on the charts. "Page me as soon as her contractions are less than six minutes apart."

The private birthing suite Cabernet was assigned to for her delivery resembled a cross between a motel room and hospital room, what with the electronic bed that enabled Cabby to change its height and move the back up or down, an ensuite bathroom, complete with an extra large shower and an assistance handle affixed to the wall next to the toilet, a recliner, a sleeper sofa, hideaway infant warmers, wall units for oxygen and suction equipment, all-inclusive storage

carts and a fetal monitoring system and a double sink similar to those seen in a doctor's examination room.

Cabby was seated in recliner, her legs stretched out in front of her. She was dressed in a shapeless cotton hospital gown and was sweating like a pig. There were dark circles under her eyes and her dark hair was plastered to the sides of her head. To his eyes, she had never looked more beautiful.

"Did you make the calls?" she asked weakly.

"Yes, I did. I called your aunt, who said she would handle notifying the rest of the family, and I placed a collect call to my mother, who is doing the same on her side of the world."

"What about Sherry?"

"I called her as well. She said she is on her way."

"Good." She held out a hand to him. "Help me up. I need to go to the bathroom."

"Again?"

"I've got an eight pound baby doing the rumba on my kidneys," Cabernet said with a groan as he helped her to her feet. "Be thankful it's just pee."

"That's it, lean on me," Gunter said as he slid one arm under her shoulders and rested his free hand protectively on her belly.

Halfway to the bathroom door, he suddenly felt her stomach start to harden. Cabernet screwed her eyes shut and grimaced as her knees gave out from under her.

"Ohhhh shittttt!" she moaned, leaning over in a squat while Gunter rubbed her lower back.

"You want me to call the nurse?" he asked solicitously.

"No," she replied, panting like a winded jogger. "I'm okay. It'll be a while before I'm dilated enough to deliver."

"Are you sure you want to do through this without painkillers?"

"It's not like I'm going to do it completely au naturel, honey," she said with a tired laugh. "I want to be conscious during the delivery, but that doesn't mean I want to experience every moment of the episiotomy. I'll get an epidural just before delivery, but I don't want any anesthesia or anything like that. My grandmother was given anesthesia when she gave birth to my uncle, and she never woke up."

"But that was a long time ago. Medicine is different now."

"I realize that, but I grew up hearing that story, and it really scared me the first time I heard it. The idea of going to sleep and never waking up—people say it's a peaceful way to die, but it just seems so awful. My grandmother never had a chance to tell the people she cared for how much she loved them. And I know it really messed up my grampa that he didn't get a chance to say goodbye. And she never got to see her baby... It's all so sad. I swore a long time ago that when my time came to have a baby I would never let that happen to me. Now get me to the damn john before I piss all over the floor."

Gunter helped Cabby into the bathroom and stepped back as she lowered herself onto the toilet with a deep sigh of relief. As he moved to give her some privacy, he stuck his hand into his jacket pocket and felt his fingertips brush across the photograph he had removed from the refrigerator back at the house. Once she was finished, Gunter helped her up off the seat and had her lean on him as he took her back into the birthing suite.

"Where do you want to go? The bed or the recliner?"

"I think I need to lie down for a while," Cabernet said wearily.

Gunter used the remote control device to lower the bed so that Cabernet could climb more easily into it. Once in the bed, she lay on her side, her gravid belly propped by a couple of pillows.

"Are you comfortable, honey?"

"No. But this is as close as I am gonna get," she said with a grunt.

"I'll be right back. I just remembered I forgot to call someone." He took the nurse's call button and put it in her hands, wrapping his fingers tightly around her own to make sure she had a good grip. "If you need anything, or the contractions start getting worse before I get back, just buzz the nurses and they'll come running. Okay?"

"Okay," she mumbled, clearly exhausted by her ordeal. "I love you, sweetie."

"I love you too," he said, bending down to kiss her on the side of the head, just above the ear. "Both of you."

Gunter stepped out of the birthing suite and headed back to the bank of payphones in the waiting room. He fished around in his pocket and came up with a handful of silver coins, which he a

plugged into the slot, then punched up Brut's number. The model's line rang ten times then went straight to voicemail.

"Goddamn it!" Gunter snarled, slamming the receiver back into its cradle. "You better not be lying in some gutter somewhere with a needle in your arm, you worthless fuckup!"

As he turned away from the payphone, he removed the photograph from his pocket and lifted it up so he could study it. The picture was clearly not the work of someone who had more than a cursory familiarity with a camera; it was badly lit, poorly composed and slightly out of focus. Yet, despite all those things, he could not deny that there was something about it that drew his eye to the figures trapped forever in time and space on a piece of photographic paper.

There were nine figures in all in the old warehouse that was being used for the shoot that day. Some were standing, others were sitting, and some of them were interacting with one another. Sherry was standing and making goo-goo eyes to Brut, who stood to her left, while Merlot's hand casually draped on her right shoulder. Merlot was turned in profile, her cigarette holder lifted to her lips, while she was talking to Chablis. Shiraz was down on one knee besides Chablis, apparently adjusting the straps on her shoes. Chardonnay sat in a canvas-backed make-up chair in the foreground, her gaze fixed on Sherry and Brut, her mouth set into an unbecoming scowl. Rose was standing to Chardonnay's left, pretending to go through her purse while actually staring a hole into Sherry. Cabernet was standing to the far left of Brut, one hand pressed against her lower back, one hand resting on her slightly protruding belly, grimacing at the ceiling, fighting one of the bouts of nausea that were so frequent during her first two trimesters. He could also spot himself, standing in the background, turned slightly to one side, looking down at the camera he held in his hands, just to the left of Brut and the right of Cabernet.

As Gunter stared at the photograph, he realized that nearly everyone in the picture had their head turned to one side or their faces partially obscured. The only one who was readily recognizable was Sherry, whose face almost seemed to glow, as if lit by a spotlight. Gunter studied Sherry's beaming, almost beatific features for a long

moment, not sure how to interpret what he was seeing—or even if there was anything to interpret at all.

Did this mean that Sherry, of all those assembled on that fateful day, was the only one to be passed over by Death? Or was this perhaps evidence of whatever psychic ability that allowed her to see into the future moments before setting foot on the doomed ship? Or did it simply mean that she'd been standing in the only patch of decent available light at the moment the picture was snapped? He wished he knew the answer, but he had long since come to the conclusion that he was uncomfortable playing the part of the ghostbusting psychic detective.

He had always considered himself to be a practical man, not given to flights of mad fancy. He believed in things he could see, feel, taste and hear. Not that he did not believe in death. He had certainly lost enough friends and family to know better than that. But he had never believed in Death with a capital "D". The concept of the Grim Reaper as an entity possessing intelligence and, apparently, capable of holding a grudge, would have been laughable under any other circumstances.

As a child in Munich, he had always been creative, yet grounded in reality. He had enjoyed playing cowboys and Indians and spaceman as much as the next boy, but once he reached puberty he had put aside the stuff of make-believe, much preferring the "real" and the "now", to the "yet to be" and the "never was". That was what had attracted him to photography in the first place—it was a means of utilizing existing light, objects and combining them with his own point of view to create art.

Although he had made a name for himself as an haute couture photographer, Gunter had never truly enjoyed the company of models, especially those attracted to the fashion industry. Traditional artists' models were bad enough, but fashion models, "super" or otherwise, made them seem well rounded in comparison. As far as he was concerned, the vast majority of models were a cross between large, petulant children and potentially dangerous trained animals, and having sex with them struck him as somewhat perverse—

combining the more unsavory elements of bestiality and child molestation.

Every other fashion model he had ever met had proven to be shallow, vain creatures with serious self-esteem issues that translated into eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, substance abuse problems, body dysphoria, or just plain old out-and-out narcissism. Still, he knew that fashion models didn't have a lock on being crazy and fucked up. He himself had learned that the hard way after spending two years in a relationship with a borderline psychotic performance artist from Montreal.

Still, even to this day, he, possibly more than anyone else, was surprised to find himself not only in a long-term relationship with a fashion model, but actual having a baby with one.

They had met three years ago on a photo shoot for *Vogue*. During the weekend spent in Rome for the editorial spread, Gunter had been first impressed, then captivated by Cabernet's sense of humor and her down-to-earth personality. He was still smarting from his failed romance with the crazed Canadian at the time, who was still calling him in the middle of the night and leaving rambling bilingual messages on his answering machine, so he did not act on his attraction, but in the months that followed, he would often find himself thinking about Cabernet at strange times.

Six months after the photo shoot, he was sitting around his studio, feeling lonely and sorry for himself, when one of his old university chums from Germany rang him up. He was in town for a few days and wanted to take in the sights, and offered to pay the tab if Gunter was willing to serve as his tour guide. He had gladly agreed to the deal, and they set off together for a night of barhopping.

Around four in the morning, Gunter and his friend were at the Velvet Elvis, a hip after-hours joint in the East Village that catered to celebrities looking to slum. While he and his school chum were busy knocking back Rob Roys amidst the faux-leopard skin print and retro-red vinyl of the bar, Gunter happened to catch sight of Cabernet seated in one of the back booths with Ricky Leo, lead singer of the mega-popular heavy metal band Krash.

Leo was famous for being a raging alcoholic and unabashed asshole. His penchant for mistreating the women in his life became public knowledge when a groupie had filed charges for assault and battery, after he beat her up and threw her off the tour bus in the middle of rural South Dakota, simply because he had become tired of her. And again, when his wife filed for divorce, citing repeated alcohol-fueled rages that ended in her receiving beatings that left her face, abdomen and back covered in bruises.

As he watched, Gunter could see the rock star appeared fairly angry, and although he couldn't hear what he was saying, he could tell by the tears welling up in Cabernet's eyes that they weren't words of love. Leo was a fairly tall man, with a reddish-blond head-banger's mullet that hung past his black leather-clad shoulders. He also had a strong jaw and well-chiseled features. However, no amount of pouty, bad-boy good looks could hide the fact he was an ill-tempered, surly drunk. As Cabernet's shoulders began to shake as she cried into her napkin, Leo rolled his eyes, got out of the booth and headed in the direction of the men's room.

"Excuse me a moment, Uwe," Gunter said to his friend. "I see someone I know. I won't be a minute."

Cabernet gasped in surprise as Gunter slid into the spot vacated by her date.

"Hello, Cabernet. Do you remember me?" Gunter asked, trying his best to sound comforting.

The model gave him a quick, nervous glance. Her mascara was running and she quickly looked away, daubing at it with the wadded up napkin she clutched in her hands.

"Yes. I remember. You're Gunter. You photographed me in Rome."

"I could not help but see how unhappy you are. Why do you put up with that asshole treating you that way?"

Cabernet blinked and giggled. She brought her hand up to her mouth quickly and her eyes darted back and forth, searching for any sign of Leo's return.

"No, I mean it," Gunter said, his demeanor serious. "The man is an ass. Why do you let him treat you this way in public?"

"I love him," she said, almost sighing in resignation as she spoke the words. "And he loves me, too. It's just that when he drinks—"

"You're making excuses for his behavior, not telling me why you tolerate it. Do you like it when he treats you this way?"

"No."

"Does he know that?"

Cabernet dropped her eyes, unable to meet his gaze. "Yes."

"Of course. How could he not? He can see you crying, just as easily as I can. The truth of the matter is that the bastard just doesn't care."

As he spoke, he could see Cabernet's lower lip start to tremble again. The sight tore at his heart like meat hooks. "A woman like you deserves to be treated better than this, Cabernet."

She raised her head and looked at him with those glistening brown eyes of hers. "Do you really mean that?"

"I have never spoken a deeper, honest truth in my entire life." He glanced over at his friend from out of town, who was busy chatting up an airline hostess at the bar. "Don't go away, okay? I'll be right back."

Having excused himself, he then hurried to of the men's room. After entering the bathroom, he could hear the sound of someone doing cocaine in one of the stalls. The attendant looked up from his newspaper as he approached, reaching for the lint roller. Instead, Gunter stuffed a twenty dollar bill in the man's hand and pointed in the direction of the door. The attendant nodded his understanding and left. A couple of moments later, one of the stalls swung open and Ricky Leo stepped out, pinching his nose closed with a thumb and forefinger while making a series of short, sharp sniffs.

Gunter punched the heavy metal singer square in the nose, sending him staggering back into the open stall. He fell on to the toilet, sitting askew on the seat as blood poured from his nose and down the front of his artfully ripped T-shirt.

Gunter leaned forward, one hand against the doorjamb of the toilet stall for balance, as he stabbed an angry finger at the stunned musician.

"You ever come within five feet of Cabernet again, you'll get that and more, verstehen sie mich, scheissekopf?"

Whether Leo understood German or not was unclear, but he certainly understood what Gunter meant. He flinched and raised both hands to cover his face. As he had surmised, Leo's swagger was all show. When it came to taking his medicine from someone capable of actually putting up a fight, he quickly revealed himself to be a coward.

As Gunter turned to leave, the musician couldn't resist trying to get the last word.

"Yeah, yeah. Go ahead and take the bitch. She's no goddamned fun anyway," he shouted at the photographer's back. As Gunter wheeled back around, Leo gave a girlish squeal of terror and slammed the door of the stall closed between them and shot the bolt.

Cabernet was still sitting where he had left her. As he approached the table he could see she was working to fix her make-up with the help of the mirrored compact in her purse. As she lifted her head to smile up at him, he forgot about the ache in his hand from where he had bruised his knuckles against Leo's jutting jaw.

"Come on," he said, offering her his unwounded hand. "Let's get out of here. I know somewhere better than this we can go."

"What about Ricky?"

"You don't have to worry about him anymore."

Cabernet's eyes flickered in the direction of the men's room, then back to Gunter. "Okay. I won't," she said, taking his hand, a small, pleased smile on her lips.

They ended up at Katz's Twenty-Four Delicatessen over on Houston, eating fresh poppy seed bagels while drinking cups of strong black coffee, laughing and talking like they had known each other forever. As the sun rose over the island of Manhattan that morning, Gunter realized that he had no intention of going another day without this sweet, caring, wonderful woman in his life. And from that evening since, they had not gone more than a couple of days without being near each other. Even when he or Cabernet had to travel on assignment, one of them would somehow manage to fly out to where the other was. And on the rare occasions when they were separated for more than a couple of days without being able to

rendezvous with one another, they maintained constant contact via phone and email.

Still, despite their love for one another, when Cabby became pregnant, he had not been terribly sure whether or not he wanted to be a father. After all, bringing a child into the world was a serious undertaking, one that would require a great deal of time and attention—not to mention changes to his lifestyle. However, when he saw how excited Cabernet was, and realized that she was willing to surrender her own career in order to raise their child, he was both overwhelmed by his love for her and shamed by his own selfishness.

Still, being in love had not completely turned his brain to marshmallow. As good-hearted as Cabernet was, at times Gunter found her far too willing to overlook very obvious flaws in her friends and give some people the benefit of a doubt that they did not deserve. It was that trusting nature, which refused to see the worst in those around her, that had made her such easy pickings for a lout such as Ricky Leo, and sparked Gunter's protectiveness.

For example, he had never understood her solidarity with the other models who had worked alongside her at Merlot's agency. For the most part, they had proven to be little more than walking clothes hangers. And he had never grasped why Cabernet considered Sherry her best friend. Still, he admired Cabernet deeply for sticking by her friend after the accident and helping her through her recovery. Although he had never particularly cared for Sherry before the accident, Cabernet had been right: she had saved their lives, and the life of their child. And because of that, and his love for her, he would always honor Cabernet's friendship with the scarred ex-model.

He had never thought he would be able to love someone enough that he would rather die than see any harm come to them, but that was indeed the case. The very idea of losing Cabernet, never seeing her face, or hearing her voice, or feeling the touch of her hand on his face again made his chest cinch so tight he had to struggle to breathe, and it threatened to drag the floor out from under his feet.

Before he had become involved with Cabernet, he had been guilty of being as glib and shallow, in his own way, as the models he claimed to abhor. Since meeting her, he had found himself striving to

be kinder, more patient and more tolerant of those around him. Her good nature and kind heart had gradually tempered his cynicism and lengthened his famously short fuse. Being with Cabernet made him want to be a better person than the one he had allowed himself to become. If not for her influence on his life, he probably would have left Brut to rot in the shooting gallery. Instead, he had put himself at considerable risk simply to get the idiot to sober up and do the right thing, if for no one's sake but Cabby's. More than anything, he wanted to be worthy of her love, and to prove to himself that he possessed what it took to be a good father to their child. It was up to him to try and protect his family as best as he could. This meant that he needed to find out if Brut was okay.

Gunter sighed and dragged another handful of coins out of his pocket. Since he didn't have his cellphone with him, it was possible that Brut had tried to call him and been unable to reach him. Perhaps there was a message waiting for him on his answering machine or voicemail.

He called the voicemail number for his cellphone first, but all he found was a couple of messages from clients calling to set up appointments or checking his availability. When he called his home answering machine, he was rewarded by the sound of the male model's surfer boy voice.

"Uh... Hey, Gunter? This is Brut. You there?" There was a brief pause as Brut waited to see if the photographer was screening his calls. "Pick up if you're there." Another pause; this one followed by a sigh. "Okay, well, I wanted you to know that I'm going over to Sherry's. I've been thinking that maybe she can help us. You know, since she saw the future before, maybe she can see it again. I'm on my way over there right now. Give me a call when you get this message, okay? Later, dude."

Gunter hung up before the answering machine could give out with the ear splitting *beep* that signaled the end of the message. He frowned at the phone for a long moment, then retrieved the photograph again and stared at it.

Perhaps Brut wasn't as air-headed as he'd first thought. Or maybe chasing the dragon had provided him with some insight, after all.

Maybe Sherry was the key to escaping the doom that was stalking them. Surely the fact her face—of all those in the picture—was the only one that did not have a shadow cast upon it had to mean something.

Since Sherry had claimed that she had seen everyone including herself die in her premonition, that had to mean the light that seemed to shine upon her, and her alone, was related to her ability to foresee the future. Right? Gunter massaged his throbbing forehead as if by rubbing his brow hard enough he might be able to make sense of the madness.

"Gunter."

The photographer looked up, startled from his reverie, and saw Sherry walking across the waiting room in his direction. The former model was wearing the Venetian mask he had commissioned for her and dressed in a pair of black cotton-blend Capri pants by Marciano, a black cotton long-sleeve shirt by Adam Jones, a pair of leather Prada loafers, and carrying a leather Dior bag. He looked behind her, but saw no sign of Brut anywhere.

"There you are," Sherry said, her voice slightly muffled by the mask covering her face. "I asked for Cabby's room number downstairs and they sent me up here. How is she?"

"She's doing alright. From what the doctor tells me it will be a while before the baby arrives."

Gunter raised an eyebrow, slightly perplexed by her tone of voice.

"I mean, I'm glad I haven't missed the birth. I know it's important to Cabby that I am there for the happy occasion." Sherry tilted her head to one side. The way she looked at him through the eyeholes in the otherwise impassive, doll-like face she was wearing made the photographer fight a shiver. "Is there something wrong?"

"I'm not sure," Gunter replied. "One thing I *do* know is that I need a smoke. Come with me, will you? There are a few things I need to discuss with you."

"Now?" Sherry asked, sounding more inconvenienced than intrigued.

"It's pretty important, Sherry. I think you know what I'm talking about. It's nothing I want to discuss in front of Cabby, not right now,

anyway." Gunter looked around the waiting room, then opened the door to the stairwell and motioned for Sherry to follow him. "I followed a couple of residents out for a smoke earlier. This way I don't have to go back out the main lobby and smoke in front of the hospital," he said over his shoulder as they clattered down the stairway. "It leads to a loading zone where the hospital linen service drops off and picks up the laundry, amongst other things."

Upon reaching the bottom of the stairs he pushed open a door, and the throaty roar of an industrial-strength ventilation system replaced the quiet of the hospital as they stepped out onto the commercial loading docks behind the hospital. This portion of the hospital was clearly the official smoking zone for the hospital's employees, as there were large plastic buckets placed in strategic locations half filled with sand and discarded cigarette butts. As Gunter and Sherry crossed the wide concrete apron past rolling bins full of soiled bed linens, bath towels, patient smocks and surgical scrubs, a large African-American orderly and a tiny Filipino nurse finished up their respective smokes and tossed them into one of the ashtrays.

"Let's go outside," Gunter said, pointing to one of the two open loading doors. "It's stopped raining. I don't want anyone overhearing what I have to say and, besides, I could use the fresh air." He glanced around for a moment, then located the access stairs next to the ramp that led into the courtyard where the trucks made their deliveries.

Once outside, he paced back and forth like a caged tiger while he unwrapped the cellophane from a fresh pack of cigarettes. Sherry stood at the bottom of the access stairs, her arms folded in front of her, watching him.

"Have you ever heard of Flight 180, Sherry?"

"No."

"What about Route 23?"

"No. Should I have?"

"Not really, but I think you will find them interesting, given all that has happened to you. And everyone else as well. In both incidences, young people foresaw disasters and prevented others from dying. In the case of Flight 180, a young man named Alex saved himself and

six of his schoolmates when he had a vision of the airplane they were on exploding shortly after take-off.

"A year later, a young woman driving on her way to Spring Break had a premonition in which she saw a monstrous, multi-car pile-up on Route 23. She blocked the access ramp to the freeway with her car, thereby saving her own life and those of six strangers."

"Yeah?" There was a waver in Sherry's voice that suggested that she was far more interested in what Gunter had to say than she wanted to admit. "That's really, um, kinda weird."

"Yes, it is, isn't? It gets even weirder when you realize that the dates of those two disasters are the same as the explosion in Florida." Gunter turned to look at her, but it was impossible to tell if what he was saying was sinking in. "But it stops being weird and gets disturbing when you find out what happened to the people who survived the plane crash and the pile-up."

Sherry tightened her grip on her elbows until she looked as if she was hugging herself, but did not say anything. Gunter didn't care if she wanted to hear it or not. He needed to talk out loud, if for no other reason than keeping what he was thinking inside his head from driving him insane.

"You see, a little while after each of the accidents, the survivors started to die. I don't mean they got sick from some disease. I mean they were killed. Oh, the cause of death was invariably listed as accidental, or possibly suicide, but in reality they all met gruesome, horrific ends. And even though the deaths were explained away as freak accidents, everyone who was aware of what was going on sensed something wasn't right. I mean, the odds of not just one, but five, or six or seven people who know each other dying bizarre deaths within days of each are beyond astronomical—they are unmöglich! While what happened to those people might have been ruled accidental, they were clearly not accident.

"Rumors started to swirl, and in time they became urban legends. Legends about how Death, having been cheated, had come back to stalk those who had escaped its grip, and claim those marked to die on its list. I know it sounds stupid, like some lousy teenage body count movie, but it's all true. It happened to the survivors of Flight

180, the survivors of Route 23, and now it's happening all over again... With us!"

"What you're saying is ridiculous," Sherry said, although it was hard to tell if it was the mask muffling her voice or something else that made her words sound less than heartfelt.

"How is the possibility of Death stalking those of us you helped save from dying on the *Coral Clipper* any more ridiculous than seeing the future? Yet, you claim that's what happened to you."

Sherry did not answer, but instead dropped her gaze, preferring to stare at her Prada shoes.

"I am not the only one who has seen the similarities between what is going on now and what happened to the survivors of Flight 180 and Route 23. If you picked up a paper and read something besides the fashion news, you would know that. The Post is calling it the 'Curse of Pier Thirteen'.

"Chablis, Shiraz, Chardonnay, Rose are all dead," he continued, ticking them off on his fingers. "All killed with days of each other! They all might have died young, but none of them left a good-looking corpse. They all died as the result of bizarre accidents, each more gruesome than the last, just like the survivors of the previous disasters. I am a reasonable man, Sherry. One not prone to seeing ghosts in the closet and boogey men under my bed, but even *I* have to admit I can see where this is going! Of the eight of us who survived the explosion on Pier Thirteen, only you, Cabernet, Brut and I are still alive." Gunter frowned, suddenly reminded of something. "Speaking of which, have you seen Brut?"

"No!" Sherry spat the word out as if it was poison.

Gunter's eyes narrowed. Although there was no way to tell by looking at her face, there was something about her body language that made him think she wasn't telling him the truth. "That's funny. I got a message on my answering machine from him. He said he was on his way over to see you. That was a couple of hours ago."

Sherry shrugged her shoulders. "So? I have no idea where he may have ended up. He has a tendency to drop off the face of the Earth. You know that. Besides, it still doesn't change the fact I didn't talk to him."

"It's just that Brut had this theory, you see?" Gunter put his hand inside his pocket and tapped the picture, as if to reassure himself as to the validity of his suppositions. "He thought that since you had seen the future once, maybe you might be able to do it again. Perhaps you have some kind of, I don't know, connection with Death, ja? That you might somehow be able to see when it is about to swoop down and be able to warn us as to what to do, or not do, to avoid Death's clutches."

"Bullshit!" Sherry's vehemence was clearly evident in her voice and her body posture had gone from bored to openly hostile. "I didn't have anything to do with anyone being killed, and you can't prove that I did!"

Gunter shook his head, exasperated by the former model's unwillingness to listen and baffled by her sudden combativeness. He'd never liked Sherry before the accident, and he was being reminded all too well why. The woman was a petulant brat who couldn't be bothered to give a shit about anyone's welfare but her own. "Sherry, you don't understand. That's not what I said at all. I'm not accusing you of killing anybody—"

"People die, Gunter!" Sherry said, her arms to her side, her hands balled into fists, trembling as if she was on the verge of a complete breakdown. "They die all the time. There's nothing special about that. Chablis, Chardonnay, Brut, Shiraz and Rose are dead simply because it was their time to go. Nothing more."

Gunter stopped his pacing and turned to stare at Sherry. "Brut? But I thought you said you hadn't seen him—"

There was a sudden scream of failing brakes as the back of the linen service's delivery truck struck Gunter. The rear bumper of the one hundred and fifty horsepower Ford E-Series struck the unsuspecting photographer just below the rib cage, knocking him not only off his feet but out of his expensive Italian loafers as well.

The driver of the linen service truck, a heavyset man in his mid-twenties, dressed in a steel gray work shirt and work pants, leapt out of the cab, a look of absolute horror on his face.

"Oh, dear God! Oh God, I don't know what happened! I was backing up to make my approach, and suddenly the brakes went out

on me and my foot slipped right off and hit the damn gas pedal. I swear to God, I didn't see him standing there until the last second. He must have been in my blind spot."

The driver dropped to his knees and peered up under the truck. What he saw made his face turn even paler than it already was. Lying underneath the delivery vehicle was Gunter's lower torso, severed neatly at the hips. The legs were still twitching as a pool of bright red blood spread from the truncated waist. Fighting the urge to puke, the driver got back on his feet and hurried to the rear of the vehicle.

Gunter's upper torso was pinned against the metal lip of the loading dock and, to the driver's amazement, was still alive and conscious. The photographer's head was turning back and forth, as if trying to figure out what had happened, a slightly dazed look on his face.

Because he was turned sideways and pinned between the rear bumper of the truck and the edge of the loading dock, Gunter's field of vision was limited to the couple of feet directly in front of him. All he could see was Sherry, who was still standing on the access stairs next to the loading dock, and the linen service driver.

Gunter's first thought was that he must have not been hurt that badly, because he couldn't feel any pain, then he saw Sherry's eyes. Even through the slits of the mask, he could see the former model's eyeballs were showing all white, and seemed to make the mask even more doll-like than before. She had reflexively brought her hands up to cover her mouth, even though the mask already shielded it. There was something odd about her hands, but Gunter wasn't exactly sure what it was.

"Look, buddy, hang on, okay?" The driver said, trying his best not to let the horror of the situation show in his voice and demeanor, but failing miserably. "I'm gonna go get help, okay?"

The driver turned and touched Sherry's arm. If the panicked man realized that the woman he was talking to was wearing an elaborate papier mâché mask over her real face, he showed no signs of it.

"Stay with him until I get back!"

Sherry nodded.

Gunter forced himself to look down at where his legs and lower body should have been, even though it was the last thing he wanted to do. He took a deep, shaky breath and let it out to keep himself from screaming. He had seen enough crime and accident scene photos in the past to realize that the only thing keeping him alive at that moment was the pressure of the truck holding his guts in.

He raised his head and found himself looking straight at Sherry. She had yet to move, her hands still pressed against the mask's eternally smiling rosebud mouth. As he stared at her, Gunter could not escape the feeling that he was looking at something important. Something that was there all along, but he had somehow not realized its significance.

He was starting to slide into shock. The corners of his vision were starting to go gray and blurry, like the picture on an old-fashioned television set. And there was something tickling the back of his brain, like the wings of a moth battering itself against a fading porch light. As the thing in the back of his head continued to fight toward the light, he suddenly realized what it was he was looking at.

Like most "normal" people in the presence of the deformed, he had scrupulously avoided looking at those portions of her body he knew to be malformed. Because of his polite refusal to look, he had not seen what was there all along. On the day of the party, Sherry's right hand had been a gnarled mass of scar tissue, more like a claw than an appendage. But the hand now lifted to her false face was perfectly normal, covered in smooth, unmarred young skin.

As Gunter felt his life slip from him, he suddenly understood why Sherry's face had appeared to shine in the photograph. It wasn't because she had the gift of divination. It was because Death had spared her, while casting its shadow upon all of those who surrounded her. Sherry had been the ones to save their lives, six months before, and she was the Judas goat leading them to their gruesome fates. He could see it so very clearly, as if the picture were suspended before his eyes, and realized that the order of death was determined from right to left, as if Sherry was some kind of living sundial.

First Merlot... Then Chablis... Shiraz... Chardonnay... Rose... Brut... And now himself...

"No," he gasped, summoning what little strength he had left. "No... I beg you... Not her... Not our baby... Sherry... Gott im Himmel... Bitte..."

The mask covering Sherry's face smiled as she watched Gunter die. She stood there for a long moment after the German photographer's eyes rolled back in their sockets and his upper body went as limp as the portion under the truck, then slowly turned her head in the direction of the hospital.

Six down. One and three-quarters to go.

FOURTEEN

Sherry walked back calmly in the direction she had come with Gunter just minutes before. As she neared the stairwell, the doors flew open and several interns and nurses burst forth, lead by the linen service driver.

"This way, this way," the driver said, pointing in the direction of the loading dock.

If the driver or the hospital staff noticed Sherry as she walked past them, it did not register on their faces. They were all too focused on hurrying to Gunter's aid, as futile as the effort might be. She knew the photographer was not dead yet because she had yet to experience the frigid sensation, somewhere between pain and orgasm, that accompanied her healings. But it was a matter of minutes, if not seconds, before he succumbed to the inevitable. After all, the man had been pinched off at the waist like an old tube of toothpaste. What was left of his life could easily fit into a thimble.

As she headed back up the stairs toward the maternity floor, the smile she wore underneath the mask was as serene as that of her false face. With each step, she was nearing her final goal: the complete restoration of what was rightly hers. Once her burned features were repaired, she would be free to return to the only world that ever mattered to her, free to resume her career track as the next big supermodel, a woman whose face would define beauty and femininity to a whole new generation.

As she marched toward the fulfillment of her destiny, she felt as if her bones were forged of surgical steel and her brain was made of ice. She could feel it hanging within her skull, like a bizarre ice sculpture, born of an ancient glacier, lit from within by a cold blue light that illuminated each and every fold and ripple.

There was still a warm spot in the back of her head, a tiny pinprick of glowing red, that kept repeating how there was no way for her to go back to her old life as if nothing had happened. How would she be able to explain how she went from a horribly scarred burn victim, back to an unblemished runway model? People would ask questions.

They would suspect. She would have to leave town, change her name and get work in another field.

Sherry frowned and turned down the thermostat within her head, doing her best to freeze out the last bothersome trace of heat.

As she entered the maternity ward's waiting room, she gave an involuntary gasp and nearly doubled over as a wave of cold shot through her. She had a brief vision of her head being gripped in the mouth of a beast with gray eyes and teeth made of shining ice. She staggered slightly and grabbed the wall for support as her facial muscles jumped and spasmed underneath her mask.

"Ma'am? Are you okay?" This came from an orderly who was pushing a cart filled with covered meal trays. He had paused in his rounds to fix her with a professionally solicitous stare.

Sherry turned her face from the orderly and waved him away, unable to talk while caught in the moment of healing. The hospital worker shrugged and continued pushing the cart down the hall.

Sherry quickly ducked inside the ladies restroom situated around the corner from the waiting room. Once she was satisfied no one was lurking inside the stalls, she turned to face the wall-sized mirror over the sink basins.

The mask stared back at her, its fixed features showing no signs that the woman underneath had just witnessed her best friend's lover being severed in two by a runaway laundry truck. The only hint that something might be amiss was her eyes, which shone as wet and bright as those of a junkie, eager for her next fix.

This was the first time she had been on hand to witness the actual death, and she had to admit it had shocked her. The sight of Gunter's body being struck by the truck had happened too fast to register as real in her head. Gunter hadn't looked like a living, breathing human, but more like a cleverly articulated puppet. While she had been nearby when Chardonnay's life was harvested, she had arrived on the scene after the incident. By the time she had set foot on the balcony, Chard was already locked inside her watery tomb. The same held true for Brut. While he disappeared right before her eyes, he had died later and out of view. That could not be said of Gunter. Death

had swooped in and snatched his life before she had a chance to make her exit.

Sherry lifted the mask, so that she had an unobstructed view of her face. She felt a surge of surprise, not unlike one has when unexpectedly running into an old friend one never thought one would meet again, when she saw her familiar old features, same as they ever were, looking back at her from the mirror. The only remaining mark from the accident was a long, jagged white scar that ran from the hairline above her left temple and ended just above her right eye, neatly dividing her eyebrow in two.

The surface of the mirror rippled, as if someone had tossed a stone into a still pond, and a figure suddenly appeared beside her. The second figure in the mirror was the same apparition that wore her old face. The apparition was Sherry's exact double except for the fact it lacked the scar across its forehead and had eyes the color of smoke.

"Very good, my dear. You're almost done with your appointed task. All that remains is for you to ensure that the mother dies before her wretched child can be brought into this world."

Sherry's eyes flickered to the apparition's face and back to her own. "Cabernet."

"Yes. She is the last on my list, and the final hurdle you must cross in order to reclaim your former glory."

The dying ember at the back of Sherry's head flared briefly, causing her hands to tremble. "Is her death absolutely necessary? What if something goes wrong and the child is born dead? Would she still have to die?"

The apparition's eyes narrowed and the corners of its mouth bowed down into a scowl. Sherry was surprised just how unpleasant her own face could be. "Don't try and get cute with me, mortal," the apparition snarled. "I have dealt with your species since it first crawled from the primordial ooze. You don't have what it takes to outfox me."

"It's just—do I have to actually be there, you know, when it happens? I wasn't ready to see Gunter die the way he did, and I never liked him. Cabby is my friend."

"I promised you your beauty returned. I said nothing about it being easy. Because the child is so close to being born, I will need you to remain in the delivery room throughout the entire labor. Life, that wanton slut, always has the upper hand. No matter how quickly and efficiently I cull the hordes, she always manages to find some way of covering the planet's surface with her handiwork. I trigger a tsunami that kills thousands, and she causes a population explosion on the other side of the world. I sweep the African continent with incurable disease and drought, and she allows South Korean scientists to learn the secrets of cloning stem cells that will lead to the curing of fatal afflictions. But I digress. To answer your whining question, yes, you have to stay through the whole thing. You must remain and stand by and watch your best friend and her unborn baby die. Now get in there and uphold your end of the bargain."

Cabernet could feel the tight ball in her belly again and as soon as it came it was gone. The contractions were definitely getting stronger and closer together. In her childbirth classes she had been told by the instructor to ignore labor as long as she could. The idea was that if she started getting anxious, she would wear herself out before the real work even began. Of course, ignoring what felt like King Kong-sized menstrual cramps was a lot easier said than done.

She wished Gunter would hurry up and come back so he could hold her hand. She suspected he'd snuck outside for a nicotine fix. She did not smoke, but had no problems with friends and family who did. However, they had agreed that once the baby was born, Gunter was going to throw away his smokes in favor of the patch, or the gum, or whatever the hell smokers trying to kick the habit use. Since she knew how big a change having this baby was going to make in his life, she couldn't find it in her heart to begrudge him one last smoke break. The way Gunter saw it, since he was going to spend the next few months sleep-deprived and cranky anyway, he might as well be going through nicotine withdrawal at the same time.

As uncomfortable as she might be at that exact moment, she had never been so excited in her life. If someone had told her nine years ago the biggest thrill in her life would be having a baby inside of her, she would have laughed in their face. Funny what a difference there was between the fifteen year-old Abigail Foster and the twenty-four year-old Cabernet.

When she was young, she used to lie on her bed and stare up at the pink gauze canopy over her bed and dream about what her life would be like once she was a famous supermodel such as Kate Moss, Claudia Schiffer and Naomi Campbell. She would wear fancy clothes, eat in even fancier restaurants and date rock stars. If she could realize that dream, then she would want nothing more out of life.

She was twelve when she told her parents that she wanted to be a fashion model when she grew up. There must have been something different in her eyes when she said it, as opposed to the times where she said she wanted to be a ballerina and a firefighter, because they saw it as a reason to sit down with her and discuss the matter.

Her mother, to be frank, was clearly dismayed by her daughter's decision, as she had been an old school women's libber during the late Seventies and early Eighties. She was more interested in her offspring picking a far more stable—and pragmatic—career path.

"I don't know, Abby," her mother said, shaking her head. "Honey, it's not that I don't think you're beautiful—you're the loveliest little girl in the world—but I'm just afraid you're setting yourself up to be hurt. You may not understand right now, but there's more to life than being pretty and wearing pretty clothes."

Her father, however, bless his heart, had not been quite so quick to dismiss her desire to see herself on the cover of *Seventeen* magazine. This was because he was an advertising executive and had a fairly grounded understanding of the kind of job opportunities she could expect to find, as well as the kind of money she could make.

"She could very likely put herself through college, given my connections and the right management. The average model only has a ten, maybe a fifteen year career expectancy. If we make sure she stays in school and gets a decent education, she will be in a position to have a completely separate second line of business once she's

retired. In fact, I know a retired model in Manhattan who owns and operates a modeling agency. We've used her numerous times and I've been impressed by her business sense. I could arrange for her to meet Abby and see what she has to say about her potential. If she thinks she could make it in the business, I say the least we can do is be supportive of her should she decide to go ahead and try to make a go of it."

Which was how she came to meet Merlot.

She could still remember the first time she ever set eyes of the ex-model. She was sitting in her father's office at the firm, dressed in her best new clothes, her hair freshly washed and combed, her feet barely touching the ground as she nervously kicked them back and forth. Then the door opened and this larger than life creature entered the room. The moment she crossed the threshold the air seemed to become charged with energy. Abby was particularly impressed by how the older woman seemed to be both completely at ease and yet constantly en pointe, like a ballerina awaiting her next cue. She was also fascinated by her cigarette holder. She'd never seen anyone outside of a movie actually use one.

"Hello, darling. You must be Abby. Your father has told me so much about you."

Abby was so overwhelmed by her presence she could do little more than whisper. "Yes, ma'am."

Merlot's plucked and penciled eyebrows lifted in pleasant surprise. "And polite as well! That is so refreshing in my business."

The ex-model took Abby's chin in her hand, tilting her face upward and gently turning it to either side as she did so, much like a judge in a purebred kennel show.

"Stand up."

Merlot folded her arms and watched Abby do as she commanded, gently tapping the stem of her cigarette holder against her bottom lip.

"You have a great deal of promise, my child. You have the bone structure and the face necessary of a model. As for your poise—well, that can be worked on."

"So you think I can be a model when I grow up?" Abby asked anxiously, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"Grow up?" Merlot's stroked Abby's cheek as if she was a prize thoroughbred colt. "Darling, I can get you bookings in six weeks."

Whatever her parents had expected Merlot to say with regards to their daughter's chances at a career in modeling, it definitely had not been "When can you start work?" Still, they had made a promise and felt they needed to stick by it.

At first, the assignments were relatively small and unglamorous—mostly print ads that required a good-looking young girl eating an ice cream cone or an All-American teenager modeling back to school specials. But as time passed, and Abby's hormones kicked in and started turning her into a stunningly beautiful young woman, the nature of the shoots began to change in favor of cosmetics and designer labels that catered to the youth market. When she was fourteen she was picked, along with a couple of other girls, to be the focus of a fashion editorial in *Seventeen*. That was when Merlot suggested that she change her modeling name from Abigail Foster to the far more "evocative" Cabernet. As Merlot so succinctly explained it: "My dear, everyone who is *anyone* goes by one name."

So Cabernet was born, the first of Merlot's treasured "Cellar" of top-dollar up-and-coming young faces.

After the *Seventeen* editorial, Cabby found herself the focus of more attention than she had ever known in her life. Strangers, most of them teenage girls, would come up to her in the mall and ask for her autograph or have their picture taken alongside her. Suddenly, the popular kids at school all wanted to hang out with her and invited her to their parties. Although most of the money her work brought in was placed quickly into a college fund, she still got to keep a percentage of her pay. She could afford to buy herself almost everything a fourteen year-old girl could possibly want. It was very heady stuff for a kid in the ninth grade. Too heady, as it turned out.

One day she got a call from Merlot asking her if she was available to do a last-minute Calvin Klein shoot, scheduled for the next afternoon.

"I can't. Tomorrow's a school day."

"Can't you get out of it?"

She was completely unprepared for Merlot's response. She had never experienced an adult suggesting that she do something wrong before.

"I... I dunno. I guess so."

"Excellent! I'll send a car around for you at eight o'clock."

"Better have it pick me up at the gas station down the street. My mom will have a cow if she finds out. And you *have* to get me back by six. That's when she and dad get home from work."

"Very well. It'll be our little secret then, darling. Ta-ta."

Her mother worked as a computer systems analyst for a small business outside Boston, while her father took the commuter train into the city every weekday. Normally, her father would drive his car to the park-and-ride lot, while her mother used the second family car to first drop Cabby off at school, then drive to work. After school, Cabby usually walked home on her own, since it was barely a mile away, or caught a ride with one of her friends.

The next morning, she was up and out of bed bright and early. Although she knew she shouldn't do it, she had to admit that she wasn't looking forward to the next day's algebra class. And besides, if an adult was suggesting that ditching school wasn't the end of the world—well, what was the harm in it, really? Her grades were still good. Maybe not as high as they had been the previous semester, but she was still on the honor roll. A day of playing hooky couldn't possibly hurt anyone, least of all her. Right?

As her mother dropped her off a block from the junior high she attended, Cabby was afraid her guilty heart would somehow betray her. Her mother was a great woman, but she was a hard-nose when it came to discipline—at least compared to all her other friend's moms. But then, most of her other friends' moms were divorced or separated. Either way, they had too much going on in their own personal lives to worry about what their kids were doing. Her mom, on the other hand, had a bloodhound's nose when it came to sniffing out misbehavior. However, on that morning, her daughter's behavior did not betray anything that would make her fabled "Mommy Sense"

start to tingle, and so she had simply kissed her on the cheek and dropped her off.

Cabby walked in the direction of the campus until she saw her mother's car turn the corner, then quickly headed back in the way she had come, to await the arrival of Merlot's limo at the Takee Outee convenience store a few blocks up from her house.

The shoot ran a little late. It was five o'clock when the limo dropped her back off at the store. She had plenty of time to get back to her house before her parents got back from work. Or so she thought, until she walked up the drive. The moment she saw her mother's car parked in the garage, her heart began racing and her brain went into overdrive, trying to concoct a reasonable explanation for why she was coming home from school so late. She finally decided to claim she was doing research on an essay report at the library, as she opened the front door.

Her mother was sitting in the front room, still dressed in her work clothes, her legs crossed and left foot kicking the air. That was not a good sign.

"Where have you been, young lady?"

"I-I stopped by the library on the way home—"

"Don't lie to me." Her mother's cheeks flushed as they always did when she was seriously displeased. "I know full well you didn't go to school today. I got a call at work, asking if you were sick."

Cabby dropped her eyes to the floor, unable to meet her mother's angry glare. "What did you tell them?"

"What do you think I told them?"

"I dunno," she mumbled, shrugging her shoulders.

"Just that I didn't know where you were. Do you realize how worried you had me, Abby? It's a scary world out there, sweetheart! I imagined all kinds of things happening to you... Until it dawned on me to call Merlot's office. The receptionist there told me you were on a shoot. Then I stopped being scared and simply became disappointed in you."

"I'm sorry, Mom. Really I am. I won't do it again."

"Damn straight you won't be doing it again. As of today you are completely grounded for the next three months, do you hear me? No

trips to the mall, no telephone, no going out with Jennie and Lori, no going anywhere—except to school, church and your grandparents' house. And that includes your modeling."

That caused Cabby to jerk her head back up as if she'd just been shocked with a live wire. "No, that's not fair!"

"I'm your mother, Abby. I can and I will set limits while you live under my roof."

"You can't do this to me!" Cabby shouted, stamping her foot. "I'm not a little kid you can boss around anymore. I'm Cabernet! So what if I missed a day of school? It's no big deal. Kids do it all the time. And besides, Merlot says that I have to get my face out there every opportunity I can—"

"Merlot says?"

The look on her mother's face was enough to stop her little diva tantrum dead in its tracks.

"I couldn't care less what Merlot says. She's not your mother, I am. And, as long as I remain so, there will be no ditching classes and no ignoring your homework in favor of modeling assignments, young lady! Don't run your lip out at me when I talk to you. You've some pretty big britches on you, Abby, but they're not so big I can't knock the dust off your seat with a hairbrush."

"But, Mom!"

"'Buts' are for sitting on, young lady, not making excuses. You don't understand. This is not something you can negotiate. Your father and I said you could pursue your modeling, if and only if, you kept up your grades and stayed in school. The minute your schoolwork suffers, you can kiss Merlot and her world goodbye—at least until you're on your own and out of this house. Until then, if you want to play the game, you have to play by our rules. Do I make myself clear, young lady?"

Cabby tried to meet her mother's hard, implacable stare with her own glare of adolescent defiance, but she was no match. Her mother was right and she knew it. She quickly dropped her eyes to the floor and let her shoulders go limp.

"I'm sorry, Mom. Really I am."

"I know you are, sweetie," her mother sighed, getting up from her chair to go over and hug her daughter. She kissed her on the top her head as she smoothed her hair. "And I still love you. Being a mom isn't the easiest thing in the world. You'll find that out some day."

"What did you tell dad?"

"He doesn't know. We'll keep this our little secret, okay?"

After that particular incident, her mother began chaperoning Cabby on her shoots. Although both Cabernet and her father were taken with Merlot, her mother made no bones about how she felt about the ex-model.

"The woman may be charming and all, but I do not trust her to have unlimited, unsupervised access to my child. As far as I'm concerned, she's extremely negligent when it comes to the young girls she represents. She doesn't seem to recognize the influence her opinions and behavior have over them. While these young ladies may very well be professional models, they're still teenagers. This woman's simply too jaded to be a reliable judge of what is and isn't appropriate behavior.

"Abby, you're such a trusting child. You only see the good in those around you, taking them at face value. Your father and I don't want to see you get hurt, but at the same time, we do recognize the opportunity you have. If I'm along to supervise, well, your father and I would feel far more comfortable with the situation. That way we can make sure there are no conflicts between your modeling commitments and your schoolwork. You're a teenager and you're entitled to be a teenager. Don't be in such a hurry to be grown up. You'll have the rest of your life for that. This way you can have your modeling career and be a teenager, while keeping problems to a minimum."

While Merlot was less than thrilled to have Cabernet's mother on site every time, she quickly resigned herself to the situation. Over the next couple of years as Cabernet matured, just like any good wine, her popularity as well as her asking price continued to go up. And after she was named *Seventeen* magazine's cover girl of the year for 1997, her mother quit her job and dedicated herself fulltime to her daughter's career. The very next year Cabernet—or rather, Abigail

Foster—graduated coaledictorian of her high school class and was accepted into Wellesley.

Her freshman year of college was busy, both on campus and off. Although her mother no longer served as Cabernet's chaperone, she was her de facto business manager, making sure that her daughter's academic schedule did not conflict with her various photo shoots and runway appearances. The two were extremely close, and there was nothing that went on her life that Cabernet did not share with her mother, and she relied heavily on her advice and support.

Then the unthinkable happened.

During her sophomore year, her mother was discovered to have ovarian cancer. She'd already lost one ovary to the disease as a teenager and when she got pregnant with Abby she had considered it a miracle. By the time the doctors knew what was wrong with her, it had spread to her uterus and lymph glands. Her mother was rushed to the Brigham's and Women's Hospital for an emergency hysterectomy, but it was too late. Within two months of her initial diagnosis she was dead, despite aggressive chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

Within a matter of weeks, the strongest guiding force in Cabernet's young life was snuffed out like a guttering candle. The experience of sitting at her dying mother's bedside left her with a sense of helplessness she had never known before in her young life. Mercifully, her mother's passing had been relatively easy.

Cabernet, her father and her grandparents had been taking turns sitting with her mother. That night, Cabernet had insisted that her father should go home and get some real sleep instead of curling up on the sofa in the lounge reserved for family members in the oncology wing. Her mother had been too weak to talk for the better part of two days, and could do little more than grunt or nod her head in order to communicate with her caregivers. She was sleeping a great deal—or at least did not appear to be conscious—and around midnight fell into another one of her catnaps. About an hour or so later, Cabernet drifted off in the middle of the essay she was working on for her Poli-Sci class, only to be awoken by the shrill sound of her

mother's EEG monitor flat lining, followed quickly by the night duty staff rushing in with a crash cart. But it was too late.

She was dead and had left a DNR order appended to her charts.

When the doctor told her that her mother was dead, she had wept so hard it felt as if her heart would break inside her chest. She had never known true loss before, and the pain it created was so profound it was as if one of her own limbs had been severed. Part of her was glad her mother was no longer in pain, and another part was angry at her for being relieved her mother was dead, yet another part was angry at her mother for dying, and still another part felt guilty that she was angry at her mom for leaving her and her dad alone.

In other words, she was a real mess.

Shattered by the loss of her mother, a confused and depressed Cabernet dropped out of Wellesley halfway through her sophomore year and threw herself into modeling full-time, hoping to distract herself. It was around this time that she met Ricky Leo.

Like every American girl, she had dreamed of having a rock star boyfriend. While her mother was alive, she had made sure to segregate Cabernet from the more unsavory aspects of a career in modeling, which would have definitely included Leo.

She met him backstage at the House of Blues and even though she knew he had a reputation as not only a bad boy, but a potentially dangerous one as well, she felt herself drawn to him. She saw his gruff, arrogant exterior as a front to hide the sensitive, fearful little boy inside his heart, and, at first, he had been exceptionally charming and sweet.

When she told Merlot she was dating a rock star, she was visibly pleased, but for mercenary reasons. "That's wonderful, darling. It'll raise your face time and your name recognition."

As for her father, he was too distracted by his own deep sense of loss from losing the woman he had shared his life with for the past thirty years to pay much attention to his daughter's personal life. Cabernet saw no reason to upset him any further by introducing him to a boyfriend with hair down past his shoulders and who had tattoos all over both arms and his back.

At first, dating Ricky had been exciting. She got to meet famous musicians and actors she normally would have never had a chance to get to know. And, as has Merlot had predicted, she was suddenly popping up in the celebrity photo sections of magazines like *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* and *People*. She even landed some music video work and offers of screen tests from Hollywood producers, but she wasn't really interested in acting.

It was about this time that she first met Gunter. She had been sent to a shoot in Rome and since Ricky was in the studio, she had to go alone. Normally Ricky was very jealous of other men spending time alone with her, but for some reason he'd had it in his head that all fashion photographers were gay, so he didn't mind her going off without him.

When she first met Gunter, he didn't immediately impress her. He was handsome enough, but was at least ten years her senior, and seemed aloof, with a tendency to talk to the models as if they were exceedingly smart dogs or painfully slow children. At first, he had treated her with the same disdain, but his attitude soon changed when she had laughed at a couple of off-hand remarks he'd made. From the look on his face it was easy to tell that he was pleasantly surprised she'd understood the jokes.

It was her turn to be surprised when he asked her to go out for coffee, and again for dinner. During their brief time alone, Cabernet discovered Gunter possessed a sharp wit and a low tolerance for fools. He was also a genuine person which was something she had come to realize as being somewhat rare in the circles in which she traveled. Although she found herself attracted to Gunter, she did not act on it due to her sense of loyalty to Leo. Of course, had she known that Ricky had spent the entire time she was in Rome whoring around with groupies, she might have acted differently.

After that weekend in Rome, Cabernet did not expect to ever see Gunter again. In the next few months she came to realize that she had been far off the mark when it came to her boyfriend. The sensitive little boy she had glimpsed behind the gruff, arrogant exterior of the man was the façade, not the other way around. The harsh reality of the matter was that Ricky Leo was a self-centered,

narcissistic asshole who had no interest, much less love, for anyone but himself.

Once Leo was confident she was hooked, he stopped being sweet and romantic and became increasingly controlling. Since he knew the first time a bruise appeared on her face or body the media would be all over him like a cheap suit, he had to satisfy himself with verbal and emotional abuse. He would criticize everything from the way she cooked to the clothes she wore to the music she liked, always finding some way to make her feel small, stupid and a worthless failure.

Although she was miserable, she still could not bring herself to break off the relationship. Every time it became evident that he'd pushed her too far, Ricky would turn back into the sweet, romantic man-child who had captured her heart. At the time, she thought he was being sincere, but in hindsight she could see that everything he did was manipulative and calculated to keep her emotionally off-balance and dependent on him. She did not have the emotional strength or the support system necessary to break away from Ricky, and he knew it.

All that changed the night Gunter saw her out with Ricky at the Velvet Elvis. She couldn't remember exactly what it was that had set him off on his tirade that night—not that it mattered, really. All his rants boiled down to the same thing: she was stupid and he knew everything.

When Gunter sat down opposite her at the table, she was both genuinely happy to see him again and shamed that someone who knew her had witnessed her shabby treatment. She had never truly forgotten the good times she'd had with Gunter, and recognized his reappearance as a sign. The moment she took his hand and walked out of that nightclub, she also walked away from the stereotypical, but all too real, dangers of the supermodel lifestyle.

Being with Gunter was a tonic to her bruised soul and helped rekindle her self-confidence. Within a month, she decided to go back to school, this time enrolling at Hunter. Gunter supported her decision and did not complain when her class work interfered with their private time.

True, Gunter was something of a prickly personality. He tended to be far more suspicious of other people and their motives than she tended to be. But when he was with her, he was kind, thoughtful and loving. In many ways he reminded her of her mother. Gunter often chided her for being "too good for your own good" when it came to other people.

The only real sore spot in their relationship was her friendship with Sherry. Gunter had never liked her for some reason and considered the model, who was five years Cabernet's junior, a corrupting influence.

Granted, Sherry could be exceptionally self-obsessed, but Cabernet believed it had more to do with how she was raised than some innate flaw in her psyche. Sherry had never had anyone really "there" for her, on an emotional level. Although she had only met Sherry's mother once, she had struck Cabernet as decidedly unpleasant and emotionally unavailable woman who was deeply jealous of her daughter's good looks and the attention it brought her.

Cabernet first met Sherry five years ago, shortly after the younger girl had arrived in New York. She was twenty, Sherry was sixteen. In fact, she wasn't even Sherry yet—she was still going by her given name, Stephanie. Merlot had just brought her in from Allentown and was grooming her as a possible addition to the Cellar. By that time, Chardonnay and Shiraz were already in place, but Cabernet was the most established of the group. Merlot introduced her to the new girl, and Stephanie seemed extremely awed that someone of Cabernet's stature would bother to show her around town and introduce her to her friends.

She learned quickly that Sherry was estranged from her family back home and had filed for, and won, emancipation as a minor. That year, Cabernet invited Sherry to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with her family out at her grandparents' place on Cape Cod. Her mother was still alive and had welcomed Sherry as if she was her own daughter. Sherry had been particularly taken by Mrs Foster and spent much of the her time in the kitchen, watching her prepare food and asking her questions about the proper way to set a table and how to string popcorn garlands. When Cabernet's mother

died the next year, Sherry attended the funeral and wept as hard as anyone in the family.

After the accident, Cabernet called Sherry's mother, Mrs Pulaski, to inform her of her daughter's situation. Instead of voicing concern for Sherry's welfare, the family was worried about being held responsible for her medical bills. After that conversation, Cabernet came to the sobering realization that now Merlot was dead, she was the only support system Sherry had.

Normally she would have included Brut, who had been Sherry's steady boyfriend for the last year, but it became glaringly obvious within hours of Sherry being admitted to the hospital that he had effectively severed all ties with his former lover. Everyone knew he'd been banging Rose on the sly for the last few months, but Cabernet had hoped he would have shown more tact than to simply dump Sherry the moment she inconvenienced him. His cavalier disregard for Sherry had motivated her even more to try and be there for her friend. "Cabby?"

Sherry's voice drew her out of her reverie. She lifted her head from the sweat-soaked pillow and looked around the dimly lit room. "Sherry? That's funny. I was just thinking about you."

Sherry stood in the door to the delivery suite, looking about the room uneasily. "Things are strange like that sometimes. You haven't had the baby yet, have you?"

"No. But it's getting close. I'm about ready to ring for the nurse." She motioned weakly for her friend to come closer. "Come inside. No need for you to stand out in the hall."

"I, uh, wasn't sure if I had to be sterile or not to come in here."

"Did you see Gunter on the way in?"

"Yeah. He was smoking outside. Looked like he was having trouble keeping himself together."

"That sounds like him," she said with a tired grunt. She suddenly grimaced and gripped the bed rails. After a long moment she dropped back against the bed, panting heavily. She picked up the call button and pressed it with her thumb. "Do me a favor, sweetie. Go and get him for me. If he misses me giving birth to this baby, he's going to wish he was dead."

Sherry frowned and looked around the room once again. "Are you sure you want me to leave? I don't want to leave you alone."

"I'll be okay. The nurse is on her way. Just go get him. Hurry!"

FIFTEEN

Sherry sighed and stepped out of the room and into the corridor, looking up and down the halls. She saw a RN hurrying in her direction, a concerned look on her face. The nurse's nameplate read "L Fulci".

"Excuse me, miss?" Nurse Fulci asked as she uncoiled her stethoscope from around her neck. "Were you just in there with Miss Foster?"

"Yes."

"Does she know?"

"Know what?" Sherry asked, trying not to show that she already knew the answer to her question.

"There was a horrible accident. It happened just a few minutes ago. The father, Mr Nonhoff... I'm afraid he is dead."

Sherry put her hand over her mouth, trying to hide the fact the information was no surprise to her. "Oh my God!"

"Until she's delivered her baby, please don't say anything to her about it. The stress such news would create could be dangerous to both the mother and the baby."

"Of course," Sherry said, nodding her head. "I understand completely."

"I've paged her OB, Dr Kronenberg, he should be here any minute. He'll want to talk to you before he goes in, I'm sure." With that, Nurse Fulci opened the door to the delivery suite. From where she was standing, Sherry could see that Cabernet was gripping the bedrails again, grimacing and growling in pain as the child readied to make its entrance.

As she turned away from the scene within the hospital room, she caught a glimpse of her own reflection in the glass-fronted fire alarm case on the other side of the hall. Only it couldn't have been her reflection, because it had gray eyes.

"What the hell are you doing out in the hall?" snarled the apparition. "You were told to stay in the room with her!"

"I know. It's just that she asked me to go find Gunter, and now I have to wait on the doctor before I can go back in." Sherry replied, trying her best to keep her voice low so she would not be overheard.

"I'm not interested in excuses. I'm only interested in results." the apparition shouted back. "So that you will understand, I will illustrate my displeasure in terms you can readily comprehend. For every excuse you give me, I will undo a portion of my handiwork. Starting now."

Sherry grimaced as a jolt of pain, as sharp as a searing needle, shot across her forehead. When she opened her eyes, she could see that the reflection in the glass in front of her was once more her own. The solitary scar that bisected her brow had gone from white to bright red. Upon seeing the change, her lips drew themselves into a thin line and her eyes seemed to frost over like windowpanes on a winter evening.

"Excuse me, are you here to see Miss Foster?"

Sherry turned around and found herself looking at a tall, slender man in his late fifties, dressed in pale blue scrubs and a doctor's white coat. She did not have to look at his nametag to realize this was Dr Kronenberg, Cabernet's obstetrician.

"As a matter of fact, I am. How did you know?"

"I overheard you mention the boyfriend's name while you were on your cellphone," he explained.

"Oh. Of course," Sherry said, hoping he wouldn't notice that she wasn't carrying a cellphone.

"I assume you know what's happened?"

"Yeah, I know."

The doctor took a deep breath and blew out his cheeks in a sigh. "Your friend is going to need a birthing partner. And since Gunter isn't going to be here to do it, I need you to step up and fill in for him."

"What does that mean?"

"We just need you to hold her hand and try to keep her calm during the procedure. We don't need any more stress on the baby than necessary. All you have to do is hold her hand, talk to her, wipe

her forehead with a wet sponge from time to time. Just be there for her, okay? Think you can do that?"

"I don't have any choice," Sherry replied as she followed the doctor into the delivery room.

The difference in the room in the few minutes she'd been gone was radical. The nurse had removed the fetal monitoring system from its hiding place in one of the cabinets and changed the angle of the bed so that Cabernet was nearly sitting upright. The footboard had been removed, and gynecological stirrups were affixed to the bed. A small gooseneck examination light set on casters had been rolled to the foot of the bed, its shade angled so that the attending physician had an unobstructed view of his patient's cervix.

"She's eight centimeters, doctor," the nurse reported.

"Hello, Cabby," Dr Kronenberg said, giving her his best reassuring smile as he pulled on his latex gloves. "Are you ready to have this baby?"

"Uhhhh," was all Cabernet could say in way of a response.

"I'll take that as a yes."

The doctor motioned with his head for Sherry to move up to the head of the bed. She stepped forward timidly, fearful that her friend would realize that she was not wearing her mask anymore.

When she tossed aside the mask in the bathroom, she had assumed Cabernet would be either sedated or otherwise unconscious. It had never occurred to her that her friend would be undergoing natural childbirth and therefore awake and relatively alert.

However, as she drew closer, she could see that several hours of labor and physical exhaustion had blunted Cabernet's senses to the point that the only thing her friend was truly paying any attention to was the thing trying to work its way out from between her legs.

"Gunter? Gunter, is that you?" Cabernet grunted, groping the air with her right hand.

Sherry looked at the doctor, who nodded curtly as he pulled his surgical mask up over his nose.

"No, Cabby, it's me." She moved in closer and took Cabernet's hand in her own. The moment she did so, Sherry felt a shudder go

through her body. She had not held another human being's hand in so long; she had almost forgotten what it felt like to connect on such a basic level.

"Your hand is so cold!" Cabernet said with a tired laugh. "What did you do? Wash your hands in ice water?"

Sherry tried to return her laugh, but it stuck in her throat and came out sounding strangled. If Cabernet noticed, she showed no sign of it.

"I'm so glad you're here, Sherry," the other woman said in a hoarse whisper. "I wanted you to be here for the birth, because if it hadn't been for you, this baby wouldn't exist. And since my mom couldn't be here for this—well, you're the closest thing to a sister that I have."

Sherry looked down into Cabernet's face, trying to find the lie in what she had just said, but was unable to do so. Cabernet's hand felt so warm in her own, almost uncomfortably so. It was as if she was holding a live coal in her palm while wearing an oven mitt.

As she stared at her friend, she found herself remembering her early days in New York, after she'd left her family in Allentown. While the other models at the agency had been snotty to her when she was first introduced to them, Cabernet had been friendly.

At the time, Cabby was Merlot's star model, pulling down prime gigs. Yet she had treated Sherry like an equal. She had taken the younger model under her wing and showed her about town, introduced her to her friends and gave her hints about who to party with and who to avoid. She had shown a newcomer and, more importantly, a competitor in her field, an amazing degree of kindness in a business notorious for bitchiness and backstabbing.

Sherry was unaccustomed to the people in her life thinking of someone other than themselves, and had initially suspected the older, more established model of being up to something, but as time passed, she came to realize that Cabernet was a genuinely nice person and one willing to be her friend.

That realization came when Cabernet invited her to spend the holidays with her family in Cape Cod. At first Sherry had been reluctant to accept. Thanksgiving and Christmas with her own family had usually consisted of long stretches of boredom punctuated by

brief moments of alcohol-fueled resentment and rage, so she was uncertain what someone else's familial get-togethers might consist of. However, as the time drew closer, the prospect of spending the holidays by herself in Manhattan became increasingly unattractive. So she ended up in Cape Cod with the extended Foster family, not exactly sure what to expect.

To her amazement, it turned out to be the best Thanksgiving and Christmas she had ever experienced. The Fosters were wonderful people who welcomed her unquestioningly as their daughter's friend and embraced her as if she was a long-lost cousin.

In a way, it was like she was looking into a window at a world she had heard tales about, but never truly believed existed.

Instead of verbally deriding her daughter and accusing her of being a slut, Cabernet's mother seemed extremely involved in her daughter's life and took pride in her accomplishments. Mr Foster seemed genuinely in love with his wife, and the two would casually kiss and touch one another when they crossed paths in the kitchen or the TV room, just like honeymooners. Sherry could not remember her parents ever showing any affection to one another.

When Mrs Foster contracted cancer and died the next year, it had left Sherry thunderstruck. At the funeral, she wept for her friend's mother for she knew she could never cry for her own.

The warmth in Sherry's hand grew stronger, traveling up her arm and into her heart. As it did so, she thought she could hear the creak and groan made by an ice-covered lake as it slowly begins to thaw.

"Where's Gunter?" Cabernet gasped between contractions. "He shouldn't be missing this. Didn't you see him, Sherry?"

Sherry glanced at the doctor, who looked up from what he was doing to shake his head. "No. I couldn't find him. I don't know where he is."

"I'll die if he misses this," Cabernet said with a grunt.

Dr Kronenberg looked up from between her spread legs. "Cabby? I need you to focus for me, okay? I need you to start pushing.

Cabernet nodded, took a deep breath and pushed down as hard as she could.

"Good, good. Again."

As Cabernet readied herself for another push, she was gripped by yet another contraction. Instead of being able to surrender and take slow deep breaths, her breath caught and she gave out with a deep, guttural groan.

"Ah, God! God, it hurts!" she shrieked.

Sherry could not bring herself to look down at what the doctor was doing, and instead focused her attention elsewhere. The light from the gooseneck exam light was throwing long, stark shadows behind Kronenberg.

Sherry was aware of what looked like a series of lengthening shadows stretching across the wall. She looked around, trying to figure out what might possibly be causing the silhouettes, but could not see anything.

As she watched, the shadows resolved themselves into the outline of a skeletal hand, the bony fingers of which were slowly extending toward the bed on which Cabernet lay. As the first tenebrous finger fell across the pregnant woman's body, the infant monitoring device abruptly began to sound an alarm.

"Doctor, the fetus is in distress."

"The baby's breech."

"What's wrong?" Cabernet asked, trying to lift herself so that she could get a better view. "What's wrong with my baby?"

"Stay put, please, Cabby. All it means is that the baby is coming out backward. I have to try and turn the baby around, in case the umbilical cord is looped about the neck."

"Oh God, oh God," Cabernet sobbed. "My baby!"

"Calm down, Cabby. Getting upset will just make things worse." Kronenberg glared at the young woman with the scarred forehead, trying to get her attention, but she was staring off into space, oblivious as to what was happening to her friend.

Sherry watched, mesmerized, as the second shadowy finger stretched forth and fell upon the bed.

"The mother's pressure is starting to drop," Nurse Fulci said, looking alarmed.

"Stay with us, Cabby," Kronenberg said loudly as he worked frantically to turn the baby around. "We need your help with this."

As Death's hand, unseen by all but one, continued to reach out slowly and take Cabernet into its clutches, Sherry looked down at the hand clasped so tightly within her own. Memories, as fleet and flickering as tiny minnows, began to flood her mind. Most of them were vague and half-formed, as if seen through a heavy fog. Some only consisted of voices, echoing from a great distance. One of the voices, which sounded very familiar, kept saying the same thing again and again.

"Wake up, Sherry. Please wake up."

With a start, Sherry realized that what she was remembering were things that happened around her while she was in her coma.

"Wake up, Sherry. Please wake up."

There was a bright flash and suddenly the delivery room was gone. She was lying on her back, unable to speak or move. There was a tube up her nose and one down her throat. Someone was sitting in the chair beside her bed, holding her hand. She tried to bring the room into focus, to see whom it was talking to her.

"Wake up, Sherry. Please wake up," Cabernet said, tears running down her face as she squeezed her comatose best friend's hand.

There was a second flash of light and Sherry was back in the delivery room. The fetal monitor was screaming like a banshee, and Nurse Fulci was scrambling to take Cabernet's vitals.

"We're losing her, doctor."

"Damn it!" Kronenberg stepped back, his gloved hands dripping blood. "The cord's tangled and I can't get it unkinked. We may lose both of them."

Sherry looked down at Cabernet's hand, still held firmly in her own, then up at the shadowy hand silhouetted against the wall. Tears welled within her eyes and began to pour freely down her face as the ice that filled her skull thawed and turned to water.

"No," she said, shaking her head in defiance. "I can't do this. I *can't* do this!"

Sherry let go of Cabernet's hand and took a step back from the hospital bed. Dr Kronenberg and Nurse Fulci paused in their ministrations to give her a confused stare, then returned quickly to what they were doing.

"No. Not her. Not her!"

Sherry turned and fled the room, sobbing at the top of her lungs. She stumbled into the hallway, her hands clamped over her ears to try and block out the voice she knew would soon be in her head.

Where do you think you're going? the gray man shouted in her head. Get back in there, you worthless slut!

"No!" Sherry wailed as she threw herself against the wall. "I can't go through with it!"

You must!

"Not her! Anyone but her!"

You stupid cow. There's no one left but her.

Weeping inconsolably, Sherry stumbled into the women's room. She looked around, desperately trying to find the mask she had discarded earlier.

The apparition appeared in the mirror, its gray eyes blazing with rage. It was standing with its hands on hips, and watched as Sherry staggered around the rest room, looking under the stall doors for some sign of the Venetian mask.

"You still have time to forget this foolishness and go back in there and complete your contract."

"No! I won't do it. I can't do it. I will not be the one responsible for her dying. The others, they didn't matter, they weren't my friends. They didn't care about me. But Cabby... She's the only real friend I have. She's the only person who actually *cares* about me. If she's dead, what difference would it make if I'm beautiful or not? Who would be left to care about me? No one. I'd be alone. More alone than ever."

Sherry grabbed the metal trashcan next to the sink and upended it, spilling dozens of handfuls of wadded up damp paper towel onto the floor. She dropped to her knees, desperately searching for a hint of pink papier-mâché. The apparition stood in the mirror and watched her, shaking its head in disgust.

"You are making a big mistake, mortal. But one that could still be rectified—"

The apparition halted in mid-sentence and cocked its head to one side, as if listening to something. The features suddenly became

coarser, wider and darker as its borrowed body changed from that of Sherry into that of the gray man.

Sherry could hear the faint cry of a baby somewhere off in the distance. As she listened, the crying grew louder and stronger, triggering ripples in the surface of the mirror.

"Damn you, woman," he snarled.

"Screw you, asshole!" Sherry laughed as she got to her feet. She staggered over to the row of sinks and leaned against the counter so that her nose was almost touching the mirror's surface. "The baby's been born. Cabby's safe from you now."

"For the time being, yes," he admitted. "But you forget one thing, my dear. When it comes to Life, none of you get out of here alive."

He tossed back his head and laughed as his left hand shot forward, penetrating the mirror. The arm that emerged into the mortal world was not that of a well dressed, elderly black man, but a skeletal forearm. The fleshless fingers dug themselves into the skin of Sherry's face and gave it a single yank, like that of a magician removing the tablecloth off a full set dinner table, causing it come off in it's hand.

The gray man held up his trophy for her to see, dangling it by its fake hair like a grisly lantern, the mouth hanging slightly open and the empty eye sockets staring blankly back at her like the Venetian mask. He opened his mouth and laughed, the sound echoing in her ears like thunder.

He was still laughing when she smashed the mirror with her fist.

Cabernet laid back, her newborn son resting on her belly. His dark little head nestled to her breast as he nursed.

That had been a close one. At one point she could have sworn that she had left her body and was standing over the bed, watching everything that went on. She saw Dr Kronenberg working frantically to free her baby, and Nurse Fulci trying to stabilize her vital signs. She also saw Sherry scream in terror and flee the room. Then she was

back in her own body again, free to assist with the birth of her child and not simply watch from afar, like a ghost.

The baby was perfect: ten fingers, ten toes, two eyes and a one hungry mouth. She couldn't wait to show their child to Gunter. They had deliberately decided not to know the sex of their child beforehand. But he was now the father of bouncing baby boy.

Gunter was going to be beside himself.

SIXTEEN

Looking in the mirror, Sherry could not believe the difference all the months had made, not just to her life, but her personal outlook as well.

The day that Cabernet gave birth to her son, Sky, was still pretty blurry, even after all this time. According to the hospital staff, she had suffered some kind of mental breakdown in the ladies restroom. Her doctors seemed to think the psychotic break was due to the depression caused by her disfigurement, combined with the stress of possibly losing both Cabby and her baby shortly after witnessing Gunter's horrific death.

In any case, they had found her screaming at the top of her lungs, her hands badly lacerated from having smashed the mirror over the sink basins. As the orderlies struggled to keep her under control while an intern sedated her, she babbled about how she had cheated Death and that she had saved her friend and godchild by destroying her face.

Following the breakdown, she was under observation in the psych ward for the better part of thirty days. Her only visitor during that time had been Cabernet. Then again, Cabby was the only friend she had left.

The first time Cabby came to see her, Sherry burst into tears and begged her forgiveness. She said she was ashamed of what she had done and that she did not deserve any kindness from anyone, especially her. Cabby did not understand what she was talking about and assumed she meant she was embarrassed for running out on her during the delivery, so she forgave her.

While she was recovering from her mental collapse, Cabernet brought her an article she'd found in a medical journal, discussing a radical new technique designed to benefit burn victims and other people suffering from disfiguring facial wounds.

The face, facial muscles and subcutaneous fat from the recipient would be surgically removed and replaced by the donor face, complete with lips, chin, ears, nose, and major blood vessels, via a

series of grafts. The person who would be getting the new face would still look like themselves though, since the musculature of the face is particular to the skull.

The only reason the procedure was still relatively experimental was because of the number of very real and serious risks confronting anyone looking to exchange their damaged face for that of a donor. The drugs used to prevent tissue rejection lowered the body's natural immune system to a dangerous degree, often leaving the patient open to a host of opportunistic diseases.

If the transplant did not take, the patient would have to undergo the nightmarish experience of watching their "new" face literally rot off their head, which would soon be followed by death from gangrene, if the patient was too fragile to undergo a second transplant.

However there was a reconstructive surgeon operating out of Manhattan who was looking for volunteers willing to undergo such a radical surgery as part of a series of medical trials for a promising new anti-rejection drug called ReCeptor.

With Cabernet's emotional support, Sherry found the inner strength to volunteer for the face transplant surgery. The next few months would prove very dangerous ones for her, as she had to spend over twelve weeks in a germ-free environment as the ReCeptor prevented her body from rejecting the new face she had been given.

The donor had been a nineteen year-old girl who had died as the result of a congenital heart defect. Thanks to Sherry's own youthfulness and otherwise good health, the surgery and recuperation period proved to be a huge success.

Now, nearly four months after the initial surgery, her face was her own again. Although she still had extensive scarring on her neck and the right side of her body, including her hand, but at least she could once again walk in the daylight without frightening small children and making grown men wince.

The moment her plastic surgeon removed the bandages and revealed her new face in the mirror, it was as if she had finally awakened from a long nightmare. For the first time in nearly a year, she had hope in her life, as well as the promise of a future.

As the days went by, and she improved more and more, it was easier for her to dismiss everything that had happened as a fever dream born of a mind unhinged by loss, grief and guilt. It made her believe that she had somehow been instrumental in the deaths of her friends simply because she had been nearby shortly before they each met their untimely ends. Mere coincidence was all it was.

Cosmically bad luck, nothing more.

Still, she had never spoken of the coincidences to Cabernet, for fear it might somehow alienate her. Cabby was her one true friend—not to mention the only one she had left—and it would utterly destroy her to lose her trust and companionship after all she had gone through.

Now the time had come, and she was leaving the antiseptic halls of the clinic and going back into the real world—one she had once believed was completely lost to her. Cabernet was going to be picking her up outside in a just a few minutes. She had told Sherry she was going to take her out to a nice dinner then let her in on some very exciting news—and make her a business proposal

As nervous as she might be about displaying her resurrected face in public, Sherry was equally intrigued and excited as to the nature of the mysterious business proposal.

As she hurried to put the finishing touches on her make-up, Sherry did not notice the calendar hanging on the wall next to her bed—or that her release date from the hospital was exactly one year from the day of the explosion on Pier Thirteen.

Cabernet sat in the back of her chauffeured limo and smiled down at her son, who was strapped into his infant car seat alongside her. Sky gave his mother a toothless grin, and kicked his feet and waved his hands in unison. When he smiled he was very much his father's child. Cabby gave a little smile that was both loving and sad as she caressed her son's chubby little cheek.

There was not a day that went by that she did not turn and expect to see him standing in the kitchen doorway, quietly watching her

cook, as he so often had. When she woke up in the middle of the night, she often thought she heard him snoring next to her in the bed. Sometimes, when she was downstairs nursing Sky while watching television, she could swear she could hear the stairs in the townhouse squeak and groan, as if he was walking down to join her from his office.

When they finally told her what had happened to Gunter, the words struck her like a blow from a sword, cleaving her heart in twain. Part of her had died, while yet another part had been born, on that, the greatest and worst day of her life.

For one horrible moment she had felt herself come apart, as if all it would take to send her spiraling into the abyss would be a single breath. But then she had heard her baby cry, and she knew then that she had everything to live for cradled in her arms. Still, if it hadn't been for Sky and, to a lesser extent, Sherry, she did not know what would have become of her.

Both needed her in totally different ways, for completely different reasons. In helping to take care of them, she was able to deal with the aching emptiness left by Gunter's cruel and sudden death. She was determined to make a good thing come from the horrible tragedy that had robbed her of the love of her life and her baby's father.

Upon going through his personal papers following his death, Cabernet had discovered that Gunter had recently purchased several high-dollar life insurances policies for himself, all of which paid double indemnity in case of accidental death. Apparently he had been concerned about providing for his new family in case of the unthinkable. After all, he did travel extensively in his line of business, and had been increasingly concerned about the possibility of the commercial air carriers he flew on crashing after take-off or being piloted into tall buildings. By the time the insurance companies had all settled up, the total amount was just under two million dollars, and that did not even take into consideration the out of court settlements her civil attorney had got from the linen service and the hospital

Still, she would gladly give up every cent of the insurance money if she could have Gunter back. But that was impossible. There was no

reclaiming the life she once had just as there was no way Sherry could ever go back to being a model. However, that did not have to mean there was no future for them.

Gunter would not have wanted her to simply give up and quit. So she decided to put her new fortune and her business degree to work and create something new, not just for herself and Sky, but for Sherry as well.

She glanced down at the attaché case at her feet. Inside it were the business plans for her very own modeling agency. She was going to propose over dinner that Sherry come in with her as her partner, and together they could continue Merlot's legacy and participate in the industry they knew so well—only this time from behind the camera.

She had often talked about doing something similar with Gunter late at night, as they lay in bed, tangled in each other's limbs, and she knew deep down in her heart that it was what he would have wanted her to do. Although, in all fairness, he probably would not have approved of her choice in business partners.

Sherry hurried down the hallway to the elevator, her Louis Vuitton suitcase in one hand, her Gucci purse slung over her other shoulder, and her cellphone tucked into the front breast pocket of her Prada jacket

She was excited to be finally free to walk the streets of New York once again, now that her face had been restored and her immune system had bounced back from the anti-rejection drugs. She felt stronger and more positive than she had since the initial accident that destroyed her career. At least this time she knew she had a home waiting for her, one that she did not have to worry about being taken away from her, since Cabby had paid off the mortgage on the loft for her.

With Gunter no longer in the way, she and Cabernet were free to resume the tight friendship they had once had. Sherry was determined to make sure her friend never had cause to regret helping her out, and she was eager to start being a godmother to little Sky

and provide him with the love, support and guidance she had never got from her own blood relations.

Things would not be easy for her, but at least her future was considerably brighter than it had been months before. She would have to struggle and face hardships—but at least she was no longer haunted by mad dreams of being stalked by Death personified as an elderly black man dressed in a gray suit. Thinking back, she could not help but chuckle at how ridiculous it was.

As she exited onto the street, she scanned the portion of the sidewalk directly in front of the hospital designated for loading and unloading of patients, but did not spot Cabby's limousine.

"Sherry, over here!"

The former model looked in the direction of the shout and saw her friend standing on the curb across the street from the hospital entrance, waving with her left hand from behind a brand new Mercedes sedan, while holding her infant son balanced on her hip with her right arm.

Sherry grinned and returned her friend's wave.

"Look, Sky," Cabby said to her son, pointing across the four lanes of traffic. "There's Auntie Sherry. Wave hello."

Sky gurgled and flapped his arms, bouncing merrily up and down on his mother's hip. Cabernet smiled and lowered her arm, her left hand automatically going into the pocket of her jacket. As she did so, her fingers brushed against the photograph she always carried with her. Without really thinking, she removed the picture and glanced down at it. When the police had finally released Gunter's personal effects following the investigation into the accident, she had been surprised to discover that the snapshot had been amongst them.

She recalled, vaguely, receiving the photograph in the mail. Justinian, one of Merlot's favorite stylists, had tucked it inside a sympathy card. She had stuck the picture on the fridge as a reminder of happier times, then pretty much forgotten about it. She was baffled that Gunter, of all people, would have cared enough to remove it and carry it about on his person.

But then, perhaps it wasn't that surprising, come to think of it. After all, despite his cynical nature and acerbic wit, he had been, at

his very heart, a dyed-in-the-wool romantic, and, although she had never really noticed it before, she had to admit that the light that seemed to shine down on her face, and hers alone, made her look like a renaissance Madonna. Sherry looked up and down the street, judging the speed and flow of the traffic. There was a marked crosswalk just up the block, but she was in too big a hurry to wait any longer to start her brand new life. Gathering up her belongings, she sprinted quickly across the four lanes towards the waiting limo.

Her cellphone began to ring.

Without breaking her stride, she plucked the cellphone from her breast pocket and frowned down at the caller ID, puzzled at who could possibly be calling her at that exact moment.

In blinking block letters against the pale green background was the name: "DEATH".

There was the sound of screaming brakes and Sherry looked up from her cellphone to find herself staring at a city bus barreling down on her. The driver was an old African-American man with a long face and receding gray hair, dressed in the gray uniform of a mass transit employee. As he slammed on the brakes, he gritted his teeth, revealing a set of dentures that made it look like he had a mouth full of tombstones. The last thing she saw was the final destination sign on the bus, located just above the windshield.

It read: "TERMINAL".